











Recollection as Dialectical Learning: Plato's Epistemic Response To  
The Problem of the One and Many

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### Abstract

The problem of the one and many, epistemically, is how it is possible that we can know sensible particulars. Connected to this problem are the inductive and deductive methods, which Plato unsuccessfully employs in both his *Laches* and *Meno* as methods for acquiring knowledge. These failures culminate in Meno's paradox, which challenges the possibility of inquiry itself. Plato's response, the doctrine of recollection, states that we implicitly, or potentially, have knowledge, not in a manner that can be readily grasped, but instead, through the activity of dialectic, it is possible to make that knowledge explicit or expressible. This method is demonstrated in the *Meno* when Socrates walks one of Meno's slaves through a geometrical proof. Through the aid of Socrates as an epistemic midwife the boy is able to recollect the explicit knowledge that was absent at the beginning of their discussion, thus avoiding the problems that arise from strict induction and deduction.

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## Introduction

Plato's epistemology was greatly shaped by the influence of the Presocratic philosophers. My goal in this work will be to examine the connection between the Presocratics, specifically the philosophies of Heraclitus and Parmenides, and Plato's theory of how we acquire knowledge. Through his use of the dialectical method, an activity of structured argument between two or more interlocutors, and its connection to the doctrine of recollection, which suggests that knowledge is a matter of being reminded rather than of acquiring truths as though they can be passed on from one person to another, Plato aims to address the problem of the one and the many, which he inherits from the Presocratics. This problem can most simply be stated thus: how it is possible to have epistemic stability in the physical world given that, according to the senses, the world is constantly shifting and changing? Further, according to reason if there is a unity to being then it follows that being must be one undivided thing. In either case the problem arises of how to account for particular things since, in the first case there would be no unity and therefore no objects, and in the second case there would be no individuation in order for there to be separate objects. Epistemically, the problem of the one and the many raises questions about how we reconcile these apparent contradictions in our experience; in other words, how it is possible that we perceive a stability to the world when our senses seem to tell us that the world is constantly changing and shifting, and our reason should tell us that being is a singular unified thing.<sup>1</sup> By examining the connection between the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this work I will make a distinction between sensation and perception. For my purposes I will take sensation to be what should follow were we to rely solely on our sense data and perception in a phenomenological sense of what we actually experience when we examine the world.

problem of the one and the many and the problems of induction and deduction we can see both a direct reference in Plato's works to his predecessors and an attempt to reconcile the inherent issues within the Presocratics' project.<sup>2</sup> Having addressed these problems in his early work, for instance in the *Laches*, we can see a clear movement forward epistemically by Plato's middle period, especially in the *Meno*. By tracing these problems from their source and through Plato's early period of writing I intend to show the development of his epistemic thought from the early to the middle dialogues.

This work will be broken into four Chapters. The first will deal entirely with the Presocratics where I intend to examine the thought of both Heraclitus and Parmenides. By working closely with the surviving primary texts we can get a clear picture of the origins of the problem of the one and the many. Further, this chapter will make a connection between the problem of the one and the many in Heraclitus' and Parmenides' philosophies and the problems of induction and deduction. In making this connection I aim to limit myself to epistemic considerations and also provide a clear connection between the Presocratics and Plato's early writings in how he attempts to address the problem of the one and the many through focusing on induction and deduction. In my second Chapter I will examine the *Laches* as an example of these writings and how Plato deals with the problems addressed in Chapter One by using both induction and deduction in an attempt to define courage. In the second half of this Chapter I will move to Plato's middle period, represented by the *Meno*, and examine the first third (up to section 80) of the dialogue. In doing this we can see that, since the structure of both the *Laches* and

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<sup>2</sup> This work will by no means will be meant to be any sort of final word on this connection as there is a lot of work still to be done providing answers to the many questions about this link.

*Meno* is similar up until section 80 of the latter, Plato was still working with the same epistemic concerns. But where the *Laches* ends, the *Meno* continues and in Chapter Three I will address how and why this happens, namely because Meno challenges Socrates to explain, given that induction and deduction seem to fail as methods for defining the virtues, what method or starting point we have left to use in order to do so. His challenge, referred to as Meno's paradox, poses the problem that, given someone inquiring into the nature of virtues does not already know the nature of virtue, since if he did the inquiry would be pointless, then it should be impossible for that person to ever recognize the correct answer to his inquiry should he find it. Furthermore, without already possessing knowledge about the answer to the inquiry the person should not even be able to begin the inquiry at all, since he would not even know what to begin to look for. By showing that Meno's paradox is the culmination of the problems of induction and deduction (and thereby the problem of the one and the many, since we will have seen their connection in Chapter One) I will argue that Plato's solution to Meno's paradox, namely his doctrine of recollection, is his epistemic answer to the problem of the one and the many. The doctrine of recollection states that we both have and do not have the knowledge that we are inquiring about, thereby making it possible to circumvent the problems associated with Meno's paradox.<sup>3</sup> Instead of making the assumption that we already have the answers that

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<sup>3</sup> How it is possible to both have and not have knowledge will be further discussed in Chapters Three and Four. Throughout this work I will make the distinction between what I will refer to as implicit knowledge, knowledge that is already present within the person making an inquiry but unshaped and inexpressible, and explicit knowledge, knowledge that is formed and expressible through language or demonstration. While I will further make the distinction between these two types of knowledge and explain how it is possible to move from implicit to explicit knowledge later in this work, it is perhaps easiest for the time being to think of implicit knowledge with Aristotle's *potentia* in mind. That is,

we seek, Plato argues that we should start inquiry by embracing our ignorance and through the dialectical method, an activity of question and answer between two or more people, move toward knowledge with the aid of others. This is demonstrated when Socrates works through a geometrical proof with one of Meno's slaves in an effort to express a model of how recollection works. In my fourth and final Chapter I will explain how the dialectical method works as Plato's method for recollecting and how he aims to move past the above discussed problems; by embracing our weakness rather than ignoring it and inviting others to participate in that weakness through examining the slave boy passage of the *Meno* as a model of recollection.

Next, I will examine the dialectic method and discuss its benefits over other types of education, especially implantation from without, such as the ability of dialectic teaching to convey our ignorance of a subject as well as what we do know about it and how it diminishes the risk of passing on a false opinion incorrectly as knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Finally, I will argue that the dialectical method diffuses the problem of *aporia*. Plato's dialogues often end in bafflement and do not answer the question that they had originally set out to discuss. By realizing that dialectic is a practice that each person must go through himself

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implicit knowledge enables the possibility of acquiring explicit knowledge through the process of recollection. Further, I am aware of the difficulties of what exactly it means to have knowledge. For my purposes I could have just as easily have said know and not know.

<sup>4</sup> I will use the term "implantation from without" to refer to the form of teaching where one person dictates his opinions to another who passively accepts them without argument or critical discussion. It is a form of implantation since the teacher is implanting the opinion in the student and it is "from without" since, without any type of discussion or way to check what is being taught, what is being passed on is opinion only and not actually knowledge. As we will see in Chapter Four, these opinions may in fact be correct but without proper justification, through argument or discussion, they are not knowledge according to Plato.



we can see that Plato's dialogues were not meant to profess the nature of the virtues but instead offer us a method which we can practice in order to understand their nature through our own engagement with philosophy and with one another. Thus, with this work I intend to explain how the doctrine of recollection, an activity made possible through engagement in the dialectical method, is Plato's answer to Meno's paradox, which is a culmination of the problems of induction and deduction. And, since the problems of induction and deduction are closely related to the problem of the one and the many, Plato's doctrine of recollection also provides an epistemic answer to this Presocratic problem.

## Chapter 1

The Presocratic philosophers attempted to understand how there could be stability in a world that constantly seemed to be changing. Given that the world constantly seems to be shifting and unstable according to our senses, there must be some principle that underlies things so that we can distinguish them as singular objects and recognize one object from another. In almost all instances the Presocratics attempted to unify a stability of the world under a single principle. Thus, the Presocratics are generally known for their universal statements that “all is” one principle. Heraclitus, for example, is famous for stating that “all is flux” while Parmenides’ proposition was that “all is one”. My focus here will be to examine these two postulations closely by analyzing the texts of the two philosophers and, through the examination of their theories, investigate the problem of the one and the many.<sup>5</sup> This problem, directly connected to the philosophies of both Heraclitus and Parmenides, is how it is possible to mediate between the many of Heraclitus, absolute flux, and the one of Parmenides, absolute unity, in order for there to be sensible particulars.<sup>6</sup> Directly connected to the one and the many are the deductive and inductive methods and, as we shall see, a similar problem arises between these.

In his work *On Nature* Heraclitus writes: “upon those that step into the same rivers different and different waters flow [...] They scatter and [...] gather [...] come

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<sup>5</sup> For some more in-depth discussions of the Presocratics see my bibliography, especially *The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy* and the *Routledge History of Philosophy Volume 1: From the Beginning to Plato*.

<sup>6</sup> My interest here is epistemic and thus I will avoid ontological claims as much as possible. Clearly the two are closely connected, since without the existence of particulars, perception of particulars would be impossible. Thus, it is not entirely possible to disconnect the two. It should also be noted that is a reformulation of the same problems I outlined in my introduction regarding the one and many and thus, this formulation is directly related to the previous statements.

together and flow away [...] approach and depart.”<sup>7</sup> What Heraclitus is saying here is often stated simply as “you cannot merge yourself twice in the same stream.”<sup>8</sup> Although the stream’s name may remain constant between the time one steps into it and when he subsequently steps into it again, the person’s sensation of the stream will have undoubtedly changed and thus, based on the person’s senses, it is not the same stream as it was before. For instance, as Heraclitus suggests, the waters flow, move, and shift so that if we were to rely only upon our senses we would not recognize the stream from one instance to the next.<sup>9</sup> The image of the motion and changing state of the stream is a representation of Heraclitus’ view of the sensible world as a whole and our sensation of it. It is not just the stream that is constantly moving and shifting, but also all of sensible reality is too. Thus, not only can a person never step into the same stream twice because the stream has changed, but also because the person has changed as well since he first stepped into it. The person has become older, has expended energy, has shifted his position, and therefore his perspective, and presumably now has a wet foot. According to this view, not only is it impossible to perceive the stream since it is shifting according to our senses, but also it is impossible to perceive ourselves as any sort of unified singular being. Our sensation of objects changes from moment to moment. For example, as we move toward or away from an object, according to our senses it grows or shrinks. Yet, we have an understanding that it is not the object that has changed, only our position relative

<sup>7</sup> Heraclitus, *On Nature*, 195.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Cratylus*, 402.

<sup>9</sup> That the name stays constant should be of special note here, as Plato maintains that names are the weakest linguistic signifier of what a thing is (Letter VII 342-3) and are subject to change just as the river itself changes. Language itself is also constantly shifting and changing, just as does the physical world it describes, and thus we should be very careful in our use of language to describe things.

to it. This understanding provides us with a continuity that we are perceiving the same object even though it now appears different to our senses. However, recognizing a particular by using only the senses is impossible on Heraclitus' view since both the object being observed and the person doing the observing are constantly changing according to the observer's senses.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the problem is not simply that the physical world itself is constantly changing but the observer is as well. What Heraclitus is expressing with this example is that all things are in a constant state of flux, or, as it is often attributed to him, "all is flux".<sup>11</sup>

If all things are constantly changing and shifting, as Heraclitus contends, then it would be impossible to observe particulars using only the senses since, for example, if you were to see something it would be constantly changing and shifting giving you no continuity of a singular object. This is the many in Heraclitus' philosophy; there appears to be an infinite number of instances of every object, even of every part of every object, that can be experienced through the senses. If everything is in a constant state of flux, then it is impossible to perceive any relation to or difference between one object and another object, or even any continuity of an object with itself from one instance to the

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<sup>10</sup> And yet we can and constantly do correctly perceive particular objects. Heraclitus was well aware of this. Remember just as we cannot step into the river twice Heraclitus also tells us that we can step into it twice. Thus, since sense perception alone cannot adequately recognize particulars, there must be another agent at work that synthesizes the observer's experience of motion, change, and flux into particular objects. Plato argues that this agent is the soul. All sensible things partake in the intelligible and through this the soul can access the object in a more real sense. Through this we can perceive the sensible world with continuity. See footnote one for my specific usage of sense and perception.

<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Cratylus*, 401d.

next.<sup>12</sup> For example, if I take a step toward the coffee cup on my desk, then, according to my senses, it would appear to have grown during the time in which I have taken the step. Furthermore, the cup would appear to have only one side, since using only my senses I cannot observe that it has a back. If I were to step around the cup to view it from a different angle, then the side I was originally viewing would seem to have disappeared. Based solely on sensation how would I be able to determine that this object is the same one I was viewing a moment ago, or even that this object was not actually a part of the desk that it rested upon? Descartes observes a similar problem in the Second Meditation of his *Meditations on First Philosophy* with his wax example:

Let us consider the things which people commonly think they understand most distinctly of all; that is, the bodies which we touch and see [...] for example, this piece of wax. It has just been taken from the honeycomb; it has not yet quite lost the taste of honey; it retains some of the scent of flowers from which it was gathered; its colour, shape and size are plain to see; it is hard, cold and can be handled without difficulty [...] But even as I speak, I put the wax by the fire, and look: the residual taste is eliminated, the smell goes away, the colour changes, the shape is lost, the size increases; it becomes liquid and hot; you can hardly touch it [...] But does the same wax remain? It must be admitted that it does; no one denies it, no one thinks otherwise. So what was it in the wax that I understood with such distinctness? Evidently none of the features which I arrived at by means of the senses; for whatever came under taste, smell, sight, touch or hearing has now altered – yet the wax remains.<sup>13</sup>

Much like Heraclitus, Descartes observes that when using sensation alone as a means of examining the world there can be no stability; using the senses alone can never yield a continuity in the physical world. Thus there is a major problem with Heraclitus' theory: if there can be no relation between objects, even relation of objects to themselves from one

<sup>12</sup> Even referring to objects here presupposes some sort of continuity or stability that Heraclitus argues sensation could never provide.

<sup>13</sup> Descartes, Rene. *Selected Philosophical Writings*. Trans. Cottingham, John. Stoothoff, Robert. Murdoch, Dugald. New York: Cambridge UP. 1988, 84.

moment in time to the next, then it would be impossible for us to observe objects at all. Without any continuity in our sensation we would not be able to even conceive of objects, just swirling, ever-changing flux.

Related to this problem is the problem of induction. The inductive method attempts to start with a particular, or group of particulars, and induce a universal truth from them about all particulars that are similar to the object, or objects, of inquiry. The inductive method, which is the basis of the modern scientific method, attempts to use observations about particulars to predict similar aspects in other, similar, particulars. Thus, if I notice that a piece of wood floats on water, and I test the theory out that wood floats on water on a hundred other pieces of wood, finding that they float too, then I might induce from my results that all pieces of wood float on water.

The problem of induction is best explained by means of an example. Karl Popper explained in the 1930s that individual statements about particulars cannot be used to produce a universal claim about all particulars of the same set.<sup>14</sup> He argued this theory by referring to the "black swan problem." If a researcher using the inductive method hypothesized that "all swans are white" and went into the field to test his theory, counting hundreds upon hundreds of swans, all of which were white, then he would likely conclude that his hypothesis was correct based on his observations. However there are indeed black swans, which are native only to Australia, and thus if the researcher counted every white swan on the planet outside of Australia, he would believe his theory to be sound, yet the

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<sup>14</sup> Popper, Karl R. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. 1952. London: Routledge, 1992.

inclusion of one black swan would be enough to show his hypothesis to be incorrect.<sup>15</sup> Popper's example shows the limitation of the inductive method: it is impractical, and perhaps even impossible, to count every swan on the planet, yet making a universal claim without doing so is subject to falsification by inclusion into the set only one counterexample, here the black swan. Thus, the problem of induction can be expressed as the inability to make a universal claim about a set of particulars without having direct experience of every member of that set. Of course this leads to the unsolvable problem of identifying every member of a set. Clearly the scientists in the above example did not include the black swan in the set of swans when they made their hypothesis and only later realized, upon the black swan's discovery, that it belonged to such a set. What we are most interested with here is the problem of using particulars to make universal claims about those particulars.

Heraclitus' flux, and subsequently the problem of the many, is related to the problem of induction were it pushed to an absolute extreme. The problem of induction addresses taking the finite experience of a set of particulars and from that experience making a claim about all similar particulars without experiencing them all individually as well. Heraclitus' problem is in taking the infinite sensations of ever changing, shifting flux and recognizing from it singular objects. In both instances there is an attempted move from a plurality. With regard to induction, a plurality of experiences of a set of objects and with regard to Heraclitus' philosophy, a plurality of sensations of motion and flux, to a singularity. In induction the attempted move is toward a singular claim about a

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<sup>15</sup> This was an actual case study where scientists believed that the proposition "all swans are white" was indeed true until discovering the black swans of Australia.

set of objects and in Heraclitus' philosophy the attempted move is toward an experience of a singular object, in other words a particular. Both the inductive method and the many in Heraclitus' philosophy rely on sense data to attempt to move from a plurality to a singularity, and it is in that similarity that a problem arises for both. For Heraclitus, sensation of the motion, change, and flux will never give me an experience of a singular object because based solely on my sensation I can only experience motion, change, and flux, and based on this experience there is no singular object. Induction, from my sense data about a particular object, or set of objects, will never fully justify a universal claim about that entire set of objects because my experience is limited and I cannot experience all of the objects of that set. Of course, this is a step beyond Heraclitus' more fundamental problem since for there to be induction there first has to be some observable object to begin with. The connection is that both Heraclitus' theory and the inductive method are attempts to move from a plurality to a singularity, a many to a one; with induction a plurality of observations about a set of objects to a general claim about that set of objects, and with Heraclitus's philosophy a plurality of experiences of motion, change and flux to a singular object. While Heraclitus attempts to move toward a unity from a plurality, Parmenides' attempted move is just the opposite, a move from a unity to a plurality.

Parmenides' method begins with one principle, Being, and attempts to see what logically follows. In denying sensation he relies on reason to dictate what must follow given the ideological hypothesis that Being is one unified principle. At 291 of his work titled *On Nature* he proposes a choice between what he says are the only two possible ways of enquiry, "that [it] is and that it is impossible for [it] not to be," which he calls the path of persuasion (an aspect of truth) and "that [it] is not and that it is needful that [it]



not be," which he says is an indiscernible task, for it would be impossible to know what is not.<sup>16</sup> It is from this passage that we can derive Parmenides' claim that it is irrational to speak about nothing, since in speaking about nothing we are attributing, or predicating, something to a non-existent thing.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Parmenides, in abandoning the second way of knowing, affirms the first "that [it] is and that it is impossible for [it] not to be." From this follows the proposition that if it, Being, is and if it cannot not-be then it must have always been and must always be. For if it is and cannot not-be then there could be no time, either in past or future, that it does not exist, thus, it is eternal. Parmenides here is relying on the Principle of Sufficient Reason, that all things have a cause, since "he assumes that anything which comes to be must contain within it some principle of development sufficient to explain its generation. But if something does not exist, how can it contain any such principle?"<sup>18</sup> In other words, if at one time Being did not exist, then it would be impossible for there to exist any principle to bring Being into existence.

Parmenides continues and describes Being as also unified and continuous since "it all exists alike" and "for what is draws near what is."<sup>19</sup> If all Being is one, a unified principle, then all must exist alike since, for there to be difference, there would have to be

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<sup>16</sup> Parmenides, *On Nature*, 291. To avoid confusion here I am simply going to use the existential use of "is" and avoid the predicative use altogether. While it is unclear which usage Parmenides himself is referring to, such a debate is moot for my purposes since predication already presupposes existence. It is also noteworthy here that the [it] can presumably, (again Parmenides is unclear) refer to any subject of inquiry. However for my purposes I will take [it] to mean being itself. That is, when Parmenides says that "[it] is and... it is impossible for [it] not to be" he means that Being itself must exist and cannot be non-existent.

<sup>17</sup> Even the phrase "non-existent thing" here drives at Parmenides' point since it is illogical for a thing to be non-existent because being a thing presupposes existence.

<sup>18</sup> Kirk, G. S., Raven, J. E. and Schofield, M. eds. *The Presocratic Philosophers*. New York: Cambridge UP. 2007, 250.

<sup>19</sup> Parmenides, *On Nature*, 297.

at least two things so that they could be contrasted with one another. In other words, if there were two things then there would have to be some difference that could distinguish one from the other. Finally he asserts that Being is unchanging and perfect "for it is not deficient – if it were it would be deficient in everything."<sup>20</sup> This final point follows the same basic principle as the one before it. For there to be deficiency there would have to be something that Being is lacking, and if there is something other than Being, whatever thing that Being is lacking, then there are at least two principles, which Parmenides clearly denies.

While the problem with Heraclitus' theory is that given absolute flux it would be impossible for particular objects to exist, Parmenides' problem is just the opposite, although the result is the very same.<sup>21</sup> The issue with Parmenides' theory is this: if there is only one principle, Being, and this principle is continuous and inseparable, then particulars could not exist. For there to be particulars there would have to be difference, which Parmenides maintains there is not, and separate divided objects that were distinct from one another. Furthermore, each object itself would be constituted out of its various parts, all of which differ from its other parts, as the wheel of a bike differs from the handlebars. Epistemically the problem can be regarded as this: if there were only one principle, in order for someone to know that principle he would have to be that same principle, since if he were not that principle there would be more than one thing, a

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>21</sup> For both theories it is impossible for particular objects to exist, since both philosophers are concerned primarily with ontology. My primary focus here is epistemic and thus I am more interested in examining if these objects can be perceived and known. Clearly there is a relation between existence and knowledge however; as if particulars cannot even exist according to either theory then they cannot be known. As Parmenides tells us, it is incoherent to predicate something to non-existence.

distinction between knower and known, subject and object. Since the one is perfect, atemporal and unchanging, and in order to know it the knower would have to be it, since it is undivided, then the knower would have to also be perfect, atemporal and unchanging, which would make that person Being itself.

It is also possible to approach this problem in a different way. We perceive, understand, and know things based on difference, both difference in separate objects, such as the difference between knower and known, and difference within the object itself, between the whole and its parts. For example, I can recognize a bike as a human powered mode of transport and do so through recognizing its difference from its surroundings. If this were not possible, the bike would appear no different from the road that it stood on. Furthermore, I recognize the bike as a singular object but understand that it comprises separate parts that when combined together in a certain way constitute my idea of "bike": wheels, handlebars, a seat, and so forth. Without the ability to discern these separate parts from one another, my ability to recognize a bike would not be possible. Thus, we have the problem of the one: if Being is one unified thing, then is it impossible for there to be difference, and thereby impossible for there to be particular objects. Thus, Parmenides claims that sensation is not a reliable source for the acquisition of knowledge, since there could not be particular things given his logical deduction from the one, and the senses and our experience indicate that there are particulars.<sup>22</sup> As Edward Hussey points out, "Sense-perception, [according to Parmenides], even when in fact veridical, presumably does not

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<sup>22</sup> Parmenides' student Zeno, who offered various paradoxes about the senses and our experience of the physical world, characterizes this reliance on reason over the senses.

yield knowledge because of the possibility of deception. What it reveals, not being part of the core of reality, is nonessential and not demonstrable by reasoning."<sup>23</sup>

As we have seen, the problem of the one is a problem of pluralizing or dividing a singular into particulars. This problem is closely related to the problem of deduction, which also attempts to divide a singular principle or apply a singular principle to a plurality of instances. Deduction is strictly the opposite of induction. While induction begins with a set of particulars and attempts to make a universal claim about them based on their similarities, deduction begins with a universal claim and attempts to apply that claim to a set of particulars. The deductive method begins with a general axiom, such as all men are mortal, then asserts one or more propositions that relate to that axiom, such as Socrates is a man, in order to deduce a conclusion that should logically follow: Socrates is mortal. The purpose of this method is to move from a universal claim about all men, given the above example, to a truth about a particular instance, Socrates' mortality. Given that Socrates is a member of the set of all men and a property of all members of that set is mortality, it follows that Socrates must also have that property.

With regard to definition, deduction attempts to assert a general claim about a subject so that particular instances can fall under that definition. Thus, we start with one general claim with the purpose of proving it by showing that examples of the definition fall under it. For example, if justice is defined as "to tell the truth and return what one has received" as it is in Book I of *Republic*, then the definition stands or falls on the examples

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<sup>23</sup> Hussey, Edward. "Pythagoreans and Eleatics". *Routledge History of Philosophy vol.1: From the Beginning to Plato*. Ed. Taylor, C. C. W.. New York: Routledge, 1997, 147.

that are presented in relation to it, that is, what can be deduced from it.<sup>24</sup> The problem with deduction in the Socratic dialogues is that when giving a general definition it is possible that contradictory examples can fall under that definition. Thus, with reference to the above, it is possible to contradict the definition by offering an example that falls under it, but conflicts with what the definition is trying to define. With regard to the definition of justice proposed in Book I of the *Republic*, returning what one has received, the example that falls under the definition while refuting its claim is "this return of a deposit to anyone whatsoever even if he asks for it back when not in his right mind."<sup>25</sup> For example, suppose a neighbor had loaned you a weapon for use on a hunting trip. The next day, after overhearing a heated argument between the neighbor and his wife wherein he threatened to do her harm, the man knocks on your door asking for his weapon back. Clearly, it would be unjust to return the man's weapon since he had the intent to use it to harm his wife. However, while it is recognized that it is not just to return the weapon, the proposed definition states that you should. Thus, returning what one has received is not justice, since it is too broad: it allows concepts to fall under it that contradict what it is attempting to define. In attempting to particularize the general concept a contradiction occurs.

Both the deductive method and the problem of the one in Parmenides' philosophy are problems of attempting to move from one principle to more than one thing. In the case of Parmenides' philosophy he begins with one principle, Being, and given that one principle attempts to see what logically follows from it. The problem that occurs is that

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<sup>24</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 331d.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 331e.

given Being, there could not possibly be any division, since in dividing being there would have to be something other than Being, something separate and outside of Being. Given this proposed singularity, particular things could not exist since, if there were no difference, there would be nothing to distinguish one thing from another. The problem of deduction is a similar one in that it arises out of the attempt to pluralize one principle, which is taken as a starting point, and apply that principle to all members of a set. Given the above example from the *Republic* the principle would be justice defined as telling the truth and returning what is owed and the application would be to all acts of justice. The problem arises from the possibility of having a member of the set that contradicts the general claim itself, here returning a weapon to an individual that will use it unjustly. Thus, in both cases, the problem of the one in Parmenides' philosophy and with the problem of deduction, there is an issue with the division of a subject that creates a contradiction. With Parmenides' one the division of the one itself is a contradiction, since in dividing the one there would be more than one thing, which Parmenides clearly denies. Whereas, in the case of deduction this contradiction occurs in having a particular fall under the definition proposed that contradicts that very definition.

While Heraclitus and Parmenides approach the world from opposing directions, Heraclitus from absolute flux and Parmenides from absolute unity, they end up with the same problem: neither philosopher's theory can adequately express the existence of, and therefore our knowledge of, sensible particulars. Thus, we are presented with the problem of the one and many: how it is possible to reconcile these two different theories in an effort to mediate between them? Epistemically the problem is tied to the problems of induction, with regard to Heraclitus' flux, and to deduction, with Parmenides' one. It

seems that induction can never properly lead to a universal claim, whereas deduction can never properly derive a singular particular thing. Plato was very interested in these problems and attempted to find a solution to them. In examining them here we have set up the major issues that will dominate his epistemic philosophy, as we will see with his treatment of them in the *Laches* and in the beginning of the *Meno*, their culmination in Meno's paradox and Plato's response with the doctrine of recollection.

## Chapter 2

In Chapter One we examined the Presocratic philosophers, specifically Heraclitus and Parmenides. From their philosophies we were introduced to the problem of the one and the many, the problem of mediating between the absolute flux of Heraclitus and the absolute unity of Parmenides in order to account for particulars. Furthermore, we made the connection between the problem of the one and the many and the problems of deduction and induction. The epistemic issues raised in Plato's *Laches* and *Meno* can be viewed as a response to the problem of the one and the many and thus, given the connections we saw in Chapter One, epistemically, these dialogues address the inductive and deductive methods.<sup>26</sup> In his earlier dialogues Plato has his characters propose definitions of virtues in an effort to define them. However, the definitions are derived either inductively or deductively, as we shall soon see when we examine the *Laches*, and thus they address the same problems we examined in Chapter One. This Chapter will focus on the transition of these key philosophical issues from the Presocratic period into Plato's philosophy. By focusing on the *Laches* and the first third of the *Meno*, I will highlight the connections between the Presocratics and Plato's epistemology and show that the problem of the one and the many, as well as the problems of induction and deduction, are dominant issues which he must deal with. By then showing the further development of his thought in the latter sections of the *Meno*, which I will discuss in Chapter Three, I will examine Plato's progress in dealing with these issues from the early to middle period of his writing.

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<sup>26</sup> It should be noted here that Plato sees methodological problems such as induction and deduction as inherently proceeding from the nature of knowledge, hence the connection between induction, deduction and epistemology.



Plato's goal epistemically in the dialogues can be seen as an attempt to mediate between the universal, the forms, and their particular instantiations, in order to arrive at a proper definition of the subject of inquiry. Plato's forms are universals in which all things partake. As Heinaman explains: "the forms can only be apprehended by reason, and it will be by thinking about them, by having them in our mental view, that we will acquire knowledge of them, not by turning to the sensibles that only confusingly reflect the natures we wish to know."<sup>27</sup> Plato argues that the forms are not fully accessible to us in any effable manner since forms are beyond linguistic or demonstrative expression. Yet, if we know the form of something we should be able to define that thing which, as we shall soon see in the *Laches*, we are not always able to do. In his *Seventh Letter* Plato explains:

For everything that exists there are three classes of objects through which knowledge about it must come; the knowledge itself is a fourth, and we must put as a fifth entity the actual object of knowledge which is the true reality. We have then, first, a name, second, a description, third, an image, and fourth, a knowledge of the object.<sup>28</sup>

Plato continues using a circle as an example. Its name is, of course, circle, its description, a geometrical figure that has all points of its circumference equidistant from a center point, and its image, which could be drawn or erased. The fourth class, knowledge, differs from the first three in that it is a purely mental class whereas the prior three are all manifestations, either linguistically, in the case of name and description, or physically, in the case of the image. While Plato maintains that the fourth class is closest to the actual circle, the fifth class of objects, namely the forms, it is still separate from this class. What is significant here is that each class moves farther away from class 5, the actual circle, and

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<sup>27</sup> Heinaman, 376.

<sup>28</sup> Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 342.

as they move farther away from the actual circle the classes become more unstable. Thus, as Plato tells us:

There is something for instance called a circle, the name of which is the very word I just now uttered. In the second place is a description of it which is composed of nouns and verbal expressions [...] In the third place there is the class of object which is drawn and erased and turned on the lathe and destroyed – *processes which do not affect the real circle to which the other circles are all related, because it is different from them.*<sup>29</sup>

Thus, changing any of the objects in these categories would have no impact on the true nature of the circle (it would still contain all the properties of “circularity”). Thus, to return to my previous point that forms are not effable, we can clearly see that since discursive language is a different category altogether from the forms, to attempt to render the form qua form into language is impossible since it would put the form into a different category where it would cease to be a form.

However, while the forms are not exhausted in any discursive sense we do have some understanding of them, the fourth class on the above model, and thus do have at least some access to them. This access allows us to recognize instances of the virtues making it possible to, for example, point to a courageous act and distinguish it from an act of cowardice. This access to the forms, our ability to recognize a courageous act from one of cowardice I will refer to as implicit knowledge. Since this implicit knowledge is of the fifth class of objects it is inexpressible, for the reasons discussed above, either linguistically or by citing concrete examples. However, Plato’s aim is exactly that, to be able to give a proper definition of the true nature of the virtues, that is, to express them linguistically. While the form of something such as courage is out of the reach of

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 342b. Emphasis added.

someone trying to discern its nature in a discursive manner, in a way that he can linguistically or express in practice, Plato hopes to show that some definition of courage may be possible beyond simply pointing to specific examples of courageous acts without being able to express why they are courageous acts. This type of knowledge I will refer to as explicit knowledge: knowledge that is expressible either through language or in action. As we shall see, the problem becomes settling on a definition that is broad enough to encompass all courageous acts while narrow enough as to exclude non-courageous ones. Thus, the type of definition Plato seeks is a determination between the particular instances and the inexpressible form of the object of inquiry.

Picture Plato's line analogy. At the top we have the one or the Good, not fully knowable in any discursive manner.<sup>30</sup> Slightly below this are the other forms, which are also not fully expressible linguistically. On the bottom we have particular instantiations such as Socrates' courageous actions in Delium as described by Laches.<sup>31</sup> The form of courage is not accessible to us in a manner that we can express linguistically, since to communicate the form of courage would be to express perfectly everything about courage. On the other hand Socrates' actions in Delium also do not provide an adequate measure of the nature of courage since there could be other courageous actions that differ from this particular instance, circumstantially. The definition that Plato is attempting to find would be a mediation between the universal forms and the particular actions so that the definition would be both broad enough to encompass all courageous acts yet narrow enough to exclude non-courageous ones. Furthermore, since the definition is a mediation

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<sup>30</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 509d.

<sup>31</sup> Plato, *Laches*, 181b.

between universal and particular any particular instance of the definition should be able to be deduced from it, and the definition should be able to be induced from any particular that falls under it. Thus, a true definition of courage should be able to be induced from any particular example of courage, while any particular example of courage should be able to be deduced from the definition as well.

The *Laches* begins with a discussion of the importance of educating the youth of Athens. Two Athenian men, Lysimachus and Melesias, lament that their sons are failing to live up to the virtuous lives lead by their ancestors.<sup>32</sup> The failure of the youth of Athens to live up to their ancestors and their generally living un-virtuous lives are problems that Plato is attempting to fix by determining first, what it is that makes a good citizen, and second, if it is possible to teach this to others. Of course, the second goal here is contingent on the first, as one cannot teach what one does not know; furthermore, it is unclear whether the virtues are things that can be taught at all. It is this goal that Plato is setting out to accomplish in the *Laches*: to define the nature of courage, and to determine if it is something that can be taught. In order to establish a definition of courage, the dialogues' interlocutors attempt to use both the inductive and deductive methods. In having his characters engage inductively and deductively we see Plato engaging with the problems of deduction and induction and through them engaging with the problem of the one and the many.

As his first attempt at a definition of courage, Laches argues, "he is a man who is courageous who does not run away, but remains at his post and fights against the

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 178b. I think it is safe to assume here that Plato is meaning to categorize the youth of Athens in general and not just specifically these boys.

enemy."<sup>33</sup> On the surface this indeed may seem to be the definition of courage, but through a subsequent discussion it is found that this definition is too particular to be courage itself. We certainly would not want to claim here that what Laches has proposed is not courageous, as staying at one's designated post in battle and fighting an enemy is courageous but it, as a definition, does not constitute courage as a whole.<sup>34</sup> Socrates establishes this point by describing the tactics of a company of cavalry, or other military force that does not meet its opponent head on. In order to be effective, cavalry use hit and run tactics by which they charge their opponent, attacking in the process, and then retreat or simply pass through the opposing force until they are out of their range, thus preventing an opportunity for a counterattack. Given Laches' definition, these soldiers would not be considered courageous since they are not staying at a designated post and fighting, but rather are fighting while constantly on the move. Of course, the problem this example poses to Laches' definition is that we would certainly want to call the cavalry courageous in battle even while they use their hit and run tactics. Thus, Laches' definition seems unfit to constitute courage as a whole since it is too particular; that is, there are courageous acts that fall outside of the proposed definition. Furthermore, it should be possible to deduce any particular instance of courage from a true definition of courage,

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 190e.

<sup>34</sup> It is important to note here, as it will be a key issue later, that Laches and the other members of the discussion do somehow seem to know what courage is. For instance they were able to point out that Socrates was courageous in the retreat at Delium and they seem to be competent enough with the term itself. What I mean by this is that Laches' definition, while not constituting the whole of courage, is in fact an example of courage. He did not, for example, give Socrates a definition of some term other than courage because he didn't understand what Socrates was asking. There is a very real sense in which all the interlocutors here do know what courage is, implicitly, and it is very important for us to keep this in mind as we are reading since it will be a major premise of Plato's doctrine of recollection, which we will examine in Chapters Three and Four.

and that is not possible with Laches' definition. For instance, it is not possible to deduce the courage displayed by cavalry from it. What I mean by this is that Socrates is attempting to achieve a definition of courage that is general enough that it does not exclude any particular instances of courageous acts. A successful definition of courage should be general enough that all courageous acts fall under it so that the definition could be induced from any one of them and any of the acts could be deduced from the definition.

In attempting to explain what type of definition he is looking for, Socrates provides the example of quickness. He says that quickness is a characteristic that can be attributed to arms, legs, voice, mouth and mind. Continuing, Socrates says "suppose that I were to be asked by someone. What is that common quality, Socrates, which, in all these activities, you call quickness? I should say that the quality which accomplishes much in little time – whether in running, speaking, or in any other sort of action."<sup>35</sup> Here Socrates provides an example of the type of definition that he is looking for. Given this definition it would be possible to deduce all particular instances of quickness and from each instance it would be possible to induce this definition. However, it should be noted here that it is also possible that this is not a perfect definition of quickness and that Plato is expressing here what happens when we do not challenge a given definition of a concept. While this definition of quickness seems sound, so did the first definition given of courage at the beginning of the dialogue, and had that definition simply been accepted then we would not have moved forward philosophically at all. The interesting aspect of this passage is that while the rest of the dialogue fails to define courage, Socrates has little

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 192a.

trouble defining quickness to provide an example of the type of answer he is looking for; he even manages to do so without use of the dialectical method, which eventually Plato offers as the best method of acquiring truth. What method then does Socrates use to acquire this knowledge? Where did it come from and, perhaps most importantly, what is it about the nature of quickness that makes it so easy to define while the nature of courage is so elusive? I by no means have the answers to these questions, and raise them because of their importance regarding defining the virtues rather than because I know some solution to the problems they propose. However, I perhaps can offer some suggestions. It would seem that the most profound difference between quickness and courage would be that courage is a virtue while quickness is a *techné*, a craft or skill. Perhaps then the fact that courage is a virtue, which Plato maintains is not teachable in the same manner as a *techné* like quickness, is what makes it so difficult to define. However, even if the difference between courage and quickness is one of virtue or *techné*, it is still rather odd that Socrates so quickly grasps the definition of quickness given that he proclaims in the *Apology* that he knows that he knows nothing.<sup>36</sup> It is possible that here Plato is playing with the fact that Socrates explains that he knows nothing yet quickly grasps the definition of quickness, which points to the idea that he both has and does not have the knowledge. This will be a very important point to remember once we examine the *Meno* since it is related to the doctrine of recollection.

With his second declaration of the nature of courage Laches attempts to move forward deductively, defining courage as, "a sort of endurance of the soul."<sup>37</sup> However, in

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<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 23b.

<sup>37</sup> Plato, *Laches*, 192b.

attempting to give a broader definition of courage than his first, one that covers all instances of courage, Laches has provided one that is too general or universal. In order to illustrate this point Socrates inquires about foolish endurance and asks if this type of endurance would be considered courageous. Take, as an example, a malicious tyrant who, already having secured a city that is important strategically for his military campaign, continues to attack the remaining forces of the city. Suppose the city surrenders to the tyrant knowing that it is beaten and more fighting will only cause more harm to its citizens. If the tyrant continues to bombard the city, sieging it for days or even weeks and showing no mercy or tiredness, he would indeed be said to be showing endurance, yet harassing an already defeated city could hardly be considered courageous. Thus, Laches' general definition has allowed non-courageous acts to fall under it and therefore cannot be considered to be the true nature of courage. In other words, we are able to deduce things from this definition that are not courageous, and thus it cannot be a true definition of courage itself.

With Laches' first definition we see the problem of induction, his definition is too narrow in scope and therefore there are particular instances of courage that fall outside of it. This definition could not be induced from every particular instance of courage because it is not general enough to encompass all instances, while every instance of courage could not be deduced from it for the same reason. Alternatively, Laches' second definition demonstrates the problem of deduction. It is too general to be the definition of courage as there are non-courageous things that could possibly fall under it. This definition fails because it can be induced from a non-courageous act or because a non-courageous act could be deduced from it, thereby creating a contradiction.



Nicias steps in at this point to give his own definition, which stems from the premise that courage is a virtue and that virtues can be taught.<sup>38</sup> If this is the case then courage must be a kind of knowledge, specifically "knowledge of that which inspires fear or confidence in war, or an anything."<sup>39</sup> Socrates' response to this definition is multifaceted. First, if courage is knowledge of fear and confidence, then it is a science, and science, he maintains, should provide knowledge of the past, present, and future of its subject. For example, the knowledge that Venus is the morning star is, was, and always will be true. There was certainly a point when people did not specifically know this information, but it still holds that when a person pointed to the brightest star in the morning he was pointing to the planet Venus. Furthermore, as long as linguistic constructions stay constant, at any time in the future if someone points to the star that is referred to as "the morning star" then he will be pointing to the planet Venus.<sup>40</sup> However, courage, as the science of the inspiration of fear and confidence, would only extend to the future, since what is feared or not feared is something that we are yet to face. As Socrates explains, "then courage is a science which is concerned not only with the fearful and hopeful, for they are future only. Courage, like other sciences, is concerned not only with good and evil of the future, of the past and present, and of anytime."<sup>41</sup> Thus, the definition of courage as a science cannot hold unless we deem courage to be an incomplete science, only pertaining to one aspect, the future, and not to the past or present. On the other hand,

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 185b.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 195a.

<sup>40</sup> This is an example famously used by Frege and later Russell about identity statement problems. It is not my place here to enter into what is an ongoing debate in analytic philosophy but instead simply make a point about definitional problems.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 199b.

if courage is the knowledge of the nature of the whole of fear and confidence, the past, present and future of fear and confidence, then we are faced with the opposite problem. If fear and confidence are goods or evils, as Socrates maintains they are, then the science of courage, "is not only the knowledge of the hopeful and the fearful, but seems to include nearly every good and evil without reference to time" making the definition no longer courage but virtue itself.<sup>42</sup> While it should be noted that Socrates is happier with Nicias' definition than Laches', because it proposes that courage is a type of knowledge (a detail that Socrates himself attributes to courage), it is still either too particular, if courage is an incomplete science, or too universal if it is a complete science, and thus virtue and not courage.

The problem outlined in the *Laches* of the inability of the characters to give a proper definition of courage that is universal enough to cover all instances yet particular enough to also exclude non-courageous acts is of major concern for Plato. Laches' first definition, that courage is maintaining one's post in battle, is a case of inductive reasoning. Laches is attempting to establish a universal definition of courage by giving a specific image.<sup>43</sup> His second definition, that courage is an endurance of the soul, as well as Nicias' definition that courage is knowledge of what inspires fear or confidence are both examples of deductive reasoning; they attempt to establish a definition by starting with a universal premise and then deducing from it particular instances. The problem that Plato establishes here is that neither of these methods work to describe properly the true

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 199c.

<sup>43</sup> It is important to note here that while Laches' definition is too specific to be courage, it is not a particular instance. A particular instance would be something along the lines of "Socrates staying at his post during a particular battle" rather than "staying at one's post" which, while still specific in relation to the nature of courage itself is still universal.

nature of courage. Neither deduction nor induction can establish the proper definition of courage, and thus we are faced with the problem of where to begin our philosophical search for truth. While the *Laches* establishes this problem and then ends in *aporia*, with the characters ironically returning to school to educate themselves in light of a discussion about how best to educate the youth, Plato attempts in the *Meno* to move past this state and provide an answer to how it is possible that we can attain knowledge.

During the discussion in the *Laches* Socrates explains that he "would not have us begin [...] with inquiring about the whole of virtue, for that may be more than we can accomplish."<sup>44</sup> This is an interesting claim considering that a discussion about the nature of the whole of virtue is precisely the subject of the *Meno*. Much like the *Laches*, the *Meno* begins with the question of whether virtue can be taught.<sup>45</sup> Instead of focusing on one aspect of virtue, as Plato does in the *Laches*, here he inquires into the nature of virtue as a whole. Also resembling the structure of the *Laches* is that the discussion in the *Meno* turns first to the very nature of the subject in question in order for it to be established if it can be taught or not. This continues to be a key point for Plato as it is in understanding the nature of something that we can determine whether it is teachable. Furthermore, as we saw with the beginning of the *Laches*, in order to teach something it must first be known to the teacher.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the *Meno* begins with the same structure and goal of the *Laches*: to

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 190c.

<sup>45</sup> See my bibliography for two good discussions of this question in the *Meno*: Jane Day's *Plato's Meno in Focus* and Harold Tarrant's *Recollecting Plato's Meno*.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 185b.

define, either inductively or deductively, the virtues and then discover if they are the teachable.<sup>47</sup>

Meno begins by giving various definitions of what he believes to be virtues. It is virtuous for a man to govern the state well, for a woman to govern the house well, and so forth. Meno, thinking that he already knows the nature of virtue, gives specific examples of virtuous acts which set the discussion up to move forward inductively.<sup>48</sup> However, although he has given specific examples of what he believes to be virtuous acts, he has not provided a definition of the nature of virtue itself. Socrates is quick to point out this fact and compares Meno's "swarm of virtues" to a swarm of bees, saying,

Suppose I asked you what a bee is, what is its essential nature, and you replied that bees were many different kinds. What would you say if I went on to ask, and is it in being bees that they are many and various and different from one another? Or would you agree that it is not in this respect that they differ, but in something else, some other quality like size or beauty?<sup>49</sup>

By likening Meno's many specific instances of virtue to bees, Socrates asks what it is that makes all the individual bees such that one can recognize them all both as individuals and also all as the same thing; likewise, he asks Meno for a definition of virtue that will be common to all of his specific examples of virtuous acts. In response to this Meno refines his definition to be that virtue is "the capacity to govern men."<sup>50</sup> However, this definition proves to be too particular to be virtue, as it is possible to be virtuous without governing

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<sup>47</sup> Neither dialogue gets to this point since both dialogues end in *aporia*. This is a problem in Plato's philosophy that I will discuss in Chapter Four.

<sup>48</sup> Much like Laches, Meno is not giving particular instances of what he is trying to define, but giving generalizations that turn out to be too particular. "Men governing the state well" is a universal image whereas "Socrates governing Athens well" at a specific date and in a specific way is a particular.

<sup>49</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 72b.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 73c.

men, say in the case of a slave being virtuous. Socrates replies to Meno's various suggestions saying that they have "discovered a number of virtues when we were looking for only one. This single virtue, which permeates each of them, we cannot find."<sup>51</sup> He then asks what makes shape able to describe both straight and curved figures: how is it possible that one concept can contain contrary particulars? Again we see the problem of induction played out here. To follow Socrates' own analogy of geometry, neither a particular circle nor a particular square encompasses all of the term "shape" since there are other shapes, triangles, for example, or even other examples of the same figures (different sized squares and circles) that are also shapes. While it is possible to induce the term shape from a particular instance of a square or circle, neither is more of a shape than the other since both could be deduced from the term shape. What Socrates is suggesting Meno is doing here is giving him particular squares or circles when he is actually looking for the term shape as a whole. Just as the term shape is not exhausted by any one specific figure, the whole of the nature of virtue is not contained in any one particular instance of a virtuous act.<sup>52</sup> Here we see the same issue as the one involved in Laches' first definition: there are virtuous acts that fall outside of the proposed definition, and it should be possible to deduce any particular instance of virtue from a true definition and that is not possible with Meno's definition.

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 74a.

<sup>52</sup> The structure of what makes a circle a shape is being likened to what makes a particular virtue, courage for example, a virtue. This is linked directly to Socrates' later use of the square with the slave boy: the particular square is an example and the universal axioms about all squares lead the slave boy to the discovery of what twice the area of the square is.

In light of this discussion Meno offers a new definition of virtue: the "desiring of fine things and being able to acquire them."<sup>53</sup> Here, Meno, in light of his failure to name virtue using the inductive method, by extrapolating from his specific definitions to a general one, attempts to define virtue deductively. However, in doing this, as we have seen previously with Laches' second attempt and that of Nicias, Meno provides a definition that is too universal. Socrates explains that all men desire good things. Even those who are deemed by others to want evil are themselves attempting to acquire what they perceive as good. This is one formulation of Plato's ethical claim that no one willingly desires evil, or performs evil deeds, and doing such is simply to mistake the bad for the good.<sup>54</sup> Thus, virtue cannot be the desire for good things, since all men desire the good (or at least their own conception of the good), and if desiring the good makes one virtuous, then all men would be virtuous, and it seems that they are not.<sup>55</sup> Since the desire for the good is shown to be too broad to be virtue, Meno narrows his definition to refine this claim and only includes the second part of his original definition: the ability to acquire good things. Meno is here providing us with a prime example of the deductive method in action. His definition was too general, and thus he removes the parts of the definition that do not work, shaving it down until its scope narrows enough to include all of virtue, and excludes other things, but not too narrow that it excludes some aspects of virtue. Unfortunately for Meno, his refined definition does just that. The ability to acquire good things is far too narrow to be the definition of virtue since it should be possible to be

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 77b.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 77c.

<sup>55</sup> Take for example Lysimachus and Melesias' sons who fail to live up to the virtuous lives of their forefathers.

a virtuous person while not being able to acquire good things for oneself. Take, for example, missionaries who work to help others yet live with little wealth of their own. While we would likely call these people virtuous, given their efforts to aid others, their lack of wealth would hinder their ability to acquire good things for themselves. Alternatively, a wealthy criminal might be able to acquire many good things for himself but does so by stealing from others. We certainly would not want to call this person virtuous even though under Meno's proposed definition he would be virtuous. Thus, it is clear that Meno has not defined virtue by using either induction or deduction spurring Plato to provide his own attempt at a solution to the issue of where to begin our search for knowledge.

Both the *Laches* and the *Meno* share a very similar structure up until about section 79c of the latter dialogue where it takes a major shift in direction and focus. Both start with the question of our ability to define virtue, or at least a virtue in the *Laches*, in an attempt to understand its nature and determine if it is the sort of thing that can be taught. While both dialogues focus on the issue of definition, it is important to note that the reason that Socrates and his companions are trying to define these things is related to the education, the teachability, of them; is virtue something that can be taught and passed on from one person to the next?<sup>56</sup> This is a huge issue for Plato for reasons discussed above, and it plays a major role in both dialogues. In looking into the nature of the definition of virtue, both dialogues use both the inductive and deductive methods in an attempt to find an answer. Ultimately, both dialogues show the failures of these methods to define the

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<sup>56</sup> As we have previously looked at with regard to courage in the *Laches*: if courage is a virtue, which I believe no one would deny, and if it is found that courage can be taught, then the virtues are things that can be taught.

nature of virtue and in the end of the *Laches* and at 79c of the *Meno* the characters in both dialogues are in a state of *aporia*.<sup>57</sup>

Where Chapter One discussed the problem of one and many as it is expressed through the philosophies of Heraclitus and Parmenides, in this second Chapter I sketched the way in which Plato demonstrates this problem in his works, particularly the *Laches* and the beginning of the *Meno*. In drawing the connections between the problem of the many and the problem of induction and the problem of the one and the problem of deduction, a connection can be made, epistemically, between these Presocratic issues and Plato's attempt to define the virtues. In examining these two dialogues we get a clearer picture of how Plato is concerned with the same issues that we discussed in Chapter One. In attempting to define the virtues, starting with a particular instance of a virtue and using the inductive method in order to attempt to universalize that particular always yields a definition that is too narrow in scope, that is it does not fully account for all instances of the virtue. Alternatively, beginning with a universal claim and then attempting to deduce the proper definition of the virtue from it always yields a definition that is too broad, one that allows contrary definitions to fall under it. In either case, as we have seen with the *Laches* and so far with the *Meno*, neither induction or deduction are reliable methods to use in order to define the virtues. But if both induction and deduction fail as methods then by what means would it be possible to begin inquiry? This is precisely the question that *Meno* will propose to Socrates in the next section of the dialogue bearing his name. It is in Plato's response to this challenge, the doctrine of recollection, that we get his proposed

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<sup>57</sup> It should be noted here that while the *Meno* does move forward at this point to offer more philosophical discussion and Plato's "answer" to these issues, it too ultimately ends in *aporia*. However, this is an issue we will discuss in Chapter Four.



solution to moving past the problems of induction and deduction and therefore, since they are connected, as we saw in Chapter One, the problem of the one and the many.

### Chapter 3

As with the *Laches*, the beginning of the *Meno* shows that both induction and deduction fail as methods for defining the nature of the virtues. By concerning himself with the inherent problems of induction and deduction Plato is also addressing the Presocratic problem of the one and the many. In my first two Chapters I discussed the problem of the one and the many in Heraclitus and Parmenides' philosophies and traced the connection between it and the problems of the inductive and deductive methods through Plato's *Laches* and the beginning of the *Meno*. Where these methods are shown to fail, either by providing definitions that are too narrow in scope, in the case of induction, or too board in scope, in the case of deduction, we are now left with the problem of how to properly begin inquiry. With this problem in mind I will begin this Chapter by examining the challenge of this type of inquiry with Meno's paradox, where he aims to show that inquiry itself is either pointless or unnecessary. By arguing that Meno's paradox is the culmination of the problems discussed in Chapter Two, I will show how Plato's response to the paradox, the doctrine of recollection, is in turn his attempt to move past to the problems of induction and deduction and thereby the problem of the one and the many.

While both the *Laches* and the *Meno* share a similar structure up to the point of 79c of the latter, Plato, in the remainder of the *Meno*, makes a dramatic change in his focus. At the point where the *Laches* ends in *aporia* Meno continues his dialogue with Socrates by taking a stand and questioning what method, assuming both induction and deduction constantly fail, we have left to use if we are to define virtue. This is the major difference between the *Laches* and *Meno*: where the characters in the former dialogue do

not push Socrates, and themselves, for further progress, Meno's frustration with Socrates boils over and the dialogue continues. After their inquiry into the nature of virtue arrives at a point of failure, Meno calls Socrates a sting ray, a creature that paralyzes its prey by stinging it. I use the term frustration in referring to how Meno likely feels here as, in agreement with Scott, I believe that, "aside from the fact that he feels himself at a complete impasse, Meno may also feel that he once had something of value to say about virtue (80b), which has now been destroyed."<sup>58</sup> Meno's analogy here is to compare the sting ray's ability to paralyze its prey physically to Socrates' ability to paralyze whomever he is speaking with mentally by showing them their ignorance about a subject they had thought they had understood. Socrates replies, "as for myself, if the sting ray paralyzes others only through being paralyzed itself, then the comparison is just, but not otherwise. It isn't that, in knowing the answers myself, I perplex other people. The truth is rather I infect them with the same perplexity I feel myself."<sup>59</sup> Socrates is not proposing that he understands the nature of virtue whereas Meno is ignorant and in fact has even gone so far as to claim that he knows nothing at all.<sup>60</sup> Instead Socrates is claiming to impart the same ignorance upon his companion that he himself feels; in attempting to see if his companion has knowledge of the virtues Socrates shows him that he is actually ignorant.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Scott, Dominic. *Plato's Meno*. New York: Cambridge UP. 2006, 69.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 80c.

<sup>60</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 23a-b.

<sup>61</sup> To say that Socrates claims to know nothing is not actually quite right. In the *Apology* he actually makes the stronger claim that "human wisdom has little or no value" (23a). What makes Socrates the wisest man in the eyes of the oracle is that he at least recognizes his own ignorance. Thus, it is not just Socrates that knows nothing but human beings in

It is clear here that Meno is fed up with the fact that his discussion with Socrates is going nowhere and instead of revealing answers Socrates has made Meno realize that he knows less than he thought he did. He demands some answers from Socrates and even goes so far as to say that if he "behaved like this as a foreigner in another country, [he] would be most likely be arrested as a wizard."<sup>62</sup> This is, perhaps, an ironic passage by Plato, as Socrates is arrested in Athens, not as a foreigner but as a citizen for doing exactly what he is doing at this very point of the dialogue, that is, showing people who think they know something that they indeed do not.<sup>63</sup> We must remember that *Meno* is a well-known member of society with powerful friends; what Socrates is doing here, namely making Meno seem like a fool, is very dangerous.<sup>64</sup> Socrates, of course, knows this and he even argues that the stakes could not be higher when dealing with philosophy and the acquisition of knowledge.<sup>65</sup> Since he is concerned with ethics, Socrates believes that it is imperative that we understand the nature of the virtues, especially if virtue is the

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general. Socrates acting like a sting ray is simply a means for him to point this out to others.

<sup>62</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 80.

<sup>63</sup> Since to know something, by Plato's definition, you must be able to define it and as we have seen from both the *Laches* and the *Meno* this is not always a simple task.

<sup>64</sup> For example Socrates makes reference to Meno knowing Gorgias in sections 71c-d of the *Meno* and Xenophon describes a part of Meno's military service as a general in Book 1 of *The Anabasis*.

<sup>65</sup> For example, in the *Protagoras* Socrates warns a friend of the great risk he exposes himself to when relying on instruction from Protagoras: "do you not realize the sort of danger to which you are going to expose your soul? If it were a case of putting your body into the hands of someone and risking the treatment's turning out beneficial or the reverse, you would ponder deeply whether to entrust it to him or not, and would spend many days over the question [...] but when it comes to [...] your soul—something on whose beneficial or harmful treatment your whole welfare depends—you have not consulted your father or [...] your friends on the question of whether or not to entrust your soul to this stranger [...]" *Protagoras* 313a.

type of thing that can be taught.<sup>66</sup> This is pivotal since, in understanding the nature of virtue and the method by which it can be taught, Athens can educate its youth to be virtuous citizens. Further, knowing the nature of virtue allows the citizens of the city of Athens to act virtuously and not mistake a non-virtuous act for a virtuous one. For example, if the courts of Athens are to function properly, then an understanding of justice is paramount. Likewise, the army should understand the nature of courage so that it can distinguish courageous acts from non-courageous ones as well as teach its soldiers to be courageous.<sup>67</sup> However, the problem that has arisen from looking at both the *Laches* and the *Meno* is how such knowledge is acquired. As both dialogues have shown, induction and deduction fail as methods for defining virtue, and thus it seems that there is no proper starting point to begin inquiry. Frustrated, and likely embarrassed that he has been shown not to know what he believed that he did know, Meno challenges Socrates with the following paradox:

And how will you inquire, Socrates, into something when you don't know at all what it is? Which of the things that you don't know will you propose as the object of your inquiry? Or even if you really stumble upon it, how will you know that this is the thing you didn't know before?<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Of course knowing if virtue is the kind of thing that can be taught or not depends on the nature of virtue itself, specifically whether or not is a type of knowledge, as Socrates contends.

<sup>67</sup> And for the most part the courts do recognize justice from injustice, and as *Laches* has shown us, soldiers can recognize courageous actions from non-courageous ones, but neither seem to be able to pass this ability of recognition on to others. While both can point out just or courageous **acts** the nature of these virtues is still unknown. Perhaps pragmatically this does not seem to be a huge issue most of the time, but history has shown us that our inability to decide what is just has lead to some major problems. For example, ethics deals with questions about what is just in cases such as euthanasia or abortion.

<sup>68</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 80d.

Thus, if the nature of virtue is unknown, as it clearly is to Socrates and Meno at this point in the dialogue, then it seems impossible that they should even know what to look for in their search for it. Scott points out that,

It is important that Meno adds the qualification 'at all' when he talks of the person having no knowledge of the object of inquiry. He is imagining the would-be inquirer to be in a total blank, lacking any specification of the object in question. If Meno were not thinking along these lines, the second rhetorical question in [Meno's paradox] would make no sense. For this clarifies the first by picturing the absurd situation of attempting to choose one blank out of many for inquiry.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, in addition to knowing what to look for at the outset of the inquiry, Scott points out the absurd notion of choosing one of many blanks as the object of inquiry. In other words, Meno's paradox does not simply raise the problem of where to start an inquiry into something that is unknown, but raises the question of whether one even can recognize the lack of knowledge to begin with. If Socrates and Meno really knew absolutely nothing about virtue then they would not be able to recognize the fact that they were lacking said knowledge, since they would not even know that there was something called virtue that they did not know. Furthermore, with regard to the third question of the paradox, if they do not already know the nature of virtue then they should not even recognize it once they found it. This is a real problem for Plato's epistemology: if we already know the nature of virtue, then the dialogues are unnecessary, since we would not have to search for the definition but already have it at the ready. However, if we do not already know the nature of virtue then it follows that we could never find it, since we would not know what to look for in the definition, nor would we know the definition to be true even were we to discover it.

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<sup>69</sup> Scott, 76.

Meno's paradox provides us with the philosophical problem of how to begin an inquiry into the nature of an object if we do not already have knowledge of that object. The paradox is very much a culmination of the problem of induction and deduction, and therefore of the problem of the one and the many. As we have seen in both the *Laches* and the beginning of the *Meno* induction and deduction fail as methods for defining the virtues. It is their failures with which Meno challenges Socrates. Where both the inductive and deductive methods assume that the answer being sought is unknown they fall prey to Meno's first claim, that beginning an inquiry into an unknown thing is pointless in that the inquirer would neither know what it was he was looking for, and therefore how to even look for it, nor could he recognize the answer even were it found. The alternative to not knowing the answer being sought renders both induction and deduction (and inquiry in general) moot, as it is unnecessary to search for an answer that is already known.

However, there is a sense in which we do already understand the nature of virtue. The courts tend to do a relatively good job of honoring the just and punishing the unjust. Laches too seems to have little trouble pointing out that Socrates was quite a courageous soldier, or even act as one himself, and thus he must, at some level, implicitly know the nature of courage. The people participating in the discussions with Socrates too seem to realize when a definition that is *not* virtue or courage is proposed. They have no problem recognizing Socrates' moves to show why a proposed definition is inadequate. Furthermore, when pressed to supply a definition, each character does a reasonably good job at doing so. Laches, for instance, does indeed give a definition of courage when asked for one. While his definition may not be the absolute definition of courage, and thus not

good enough for the type of inquiry that Socrates is proposing, it is nonetheless a definition of courage and not, say, of justice or chair. What I mean to express with this point is that Laches does have some implicit knowledge of the nature of courage, since if he did not he would not be able to give a definition of it at all. Thus, the first rhetorical question of Meno's paradox must be fallacious; there is a sense in which Socrates, or any inquirer for that matter, implicitly has knowledge of the object of inquiry. If this were not the case and we had absolutely no knowledge at all, which Meno's first objection rests upon, then Laches should not be able to point to an instance of courage or follow why a proposed definition does not successfully define courage. However, while Laches does somehow possess implicit knowledge of courage he does not have it in a way that can be expressed linguistically, he does not possess the explicit knowledge. While he can point to an instance of a courageous action or give an example of such an instance (or even provide an example of a non-courageous act), he cannot define courage itself. Laches both has and does not have the required knowledge of courage.

After Meno proposes his paradox he asks Socrates if he thinks it is a good argument to which Socrates simply replies, "no."<sup>70</sup> In order to explain why the argument is not a good one, Socrates tells Meno a myth about the immortality of the soul and its rebirth upon the death of the body. He explains:

Thus the soul, since it is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen all things both here and in the other world, has learned everything that is. So we need not be surprised if it can recall the knowledge of virtue or anything else which, as we see, it once possessed. All nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, so that when a man has recalled a single piece of knowledge – learned it, in ordinary language – there is no reason why he should not find out all the rest, if he

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 81a.



keeps a stout heart and does not grow weary of the search, for seeking and learning are nothing but recollection.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, Plato suggests that the soul knows everything that there is to know, and when we access that knowledge in a way that brings it directly to mind, we have not learned the knowledge for the first time but instead have recollected it through the soul. The doctrine of recollection is an attempt by Plato to answer Meno's paradox, and thus it seeks to express how inquiry can begin. It is important here for us to consider that what Plato is suggesting is not necessarily an argument for the immortality of the soul, nor does the rest of the dialogue rest on, or argue, the claim that the soul is immortal. Instead of an argument about the immortality of the soul, or a proof of the validity of recollection, the *Meno* is a demonstration of the recollective process.<sup>72</sup> As Findlay suggests: "the doctrine of [recollection] here considered is of course mythic in its reference to an anterior life: all that the argument needs is the ability to rise from the instance to the generalized meaning, which is involved even in the Socratic treatment of dialectic."<sup>73</sup> The slave boy example, which we shall soon examine, is not proof of recollection but instead a model of how it works. Socrates having, for once, the answer to an inquiry, here a geometrical proof, and is able to check the boy's progress as a test to see if recollection, as a method of acquiring knowledge works.

Thus, Plato argues that we do somehow have some knowledge of the nature of virtue even before we begin our search, and that when we learn something new we are in

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 81c.

<sup>72</sup> This is the major difference in the discussion of recollection in the *Meno* and in the *Phaedo*. In the latter dialogue Plato is arguing specifically about the immortality of the soul. Such considerations are outside of the scope of this project and thus I will not address them here.

<sup>73</sup> Findlay, J. N. *Plato and Platonism: an Introduction*. New York: Times, 1978, 77.

fact actually recalling it and we can, from that, recollect or connect other ideas. The doctrine of recollection expresses how we can have the knowledge of virtue, such that we can distinguish the virtuous from the non-virtuous, yet still have no actual knowledge of what the definition of virtue is. Thus, since the doctrine of recollection is Plato's response to Meno's paradox, and Meno's paradox is an articulation of the problem of induction and deduction (and thereby of the problem of one and many), Plato is also replying to these problems as well. Therefore, with the doctrine of recollection, we find Plato's way forward beyond the problems of induction and deduction. Thus, the doctrine of recollection is both the beginning and the end, dialectically, of Plato's epistemology. That is to say, it provides a starting point from which to begin inquiry, the fact that the knowledge is already somehow present to us, and it provides a possibility for its end, the actual recollection of the knowledge, in the case of the *Meno* a definition of virtue. According to this theory we begin already with some sort of pre-existent knowledge when we attempt to discern the nature of any object of inquiry. Since we somehow have an idea, we can avoid the first issue of Meno's paradox, namely, how to begin an inquiry if we do not already know what it is that we are looking for. Somehow we do already have the knowledge. Thus, we can see how Laches can recognize a courageous act and not confuse courage with justice or chair.

However, what Plato is not saying here is that we already have the knowledge ready at hand and thus already know our object of inquiry. This claim would fall victim to the second part of Meno's paradox: if we already know what we are looking for then we must already possess the knowledge, thus rendering inquiry unnecessary. This idea is perhaps best expressed by way of analogy. Think of the acquisition of knowledge as an

act of navigation. Given that a person has a starting position, by knowing their own position, it would be possible for them to navigate to another location that is unknown to them. However, in order for the person to successfully accomplish this task he would need to both have and know how to properly operate the correct tools, a map and compass, and would have to have multiple points of reference, either constant, such as the North Star, or not constant, such as landmarks, such as trees, a mountain or a lake. By properly using the tools along with the reference points the person could then navigate his way from his starting position to a new, previously unknown, position. This is similar to the act of recollecting justice from the preexisting knowledge that we possess. Thus, by using this analogy we can see how recollection avoids the problems of Meno's paradox. Recollection gives us a starting point from which to begin our inquiry. We do already somehow possess the capacity for knowledge, which is represented by the navigational starting point. And yet, while we do have the capacity to begin our inquiry, our journey toward knowledge, the knowledge we seek is not immediately present to us in an explicit way and so we must work to discover it, as one would work to plot an unknown point on a map. Where the tools used in the navigational process are a map and compass, the tools used in the epistemic process are language and discursive reasoning, and the proper method for using these tools, according to Plato, is dialectic. In much the same way as the dialectical process involves two or more members, the act of navigation requires at least two points other than the unknown point the navigator is attempting to plot. These points, the navigator's own location as well as one other known location, can be used to triangulate the unknown position, given that the tools are used properly. The more points that are used in the plotting of the unknown point the more precisely it can be plotted.

Likewise, the more members that are active in the dialectic process the more positions are available to assist in the acquisition of explicit knowledge.<sup>74</sup> The navigational constant in this analogy, the North Star, would represent the form of the object of inquire, in other words the actual object itself. It can be used to guide us in the correct direction but, just as a person could never actually reach the North Star with a map and compass, we can never fully grasp the form of the object.<sup>75</sup> Recollection then, is the process whereby we navigate from a known position, implicit knowledge, to an unknown position, explicit knowledge, through the proper use of language and demonstration as tools as well as the opinions of others as navigational points.

To think of recollection as an act of the memory, such as remembering where one left his car keys, the face of an old friend, or his computer's password, is to make a critical mistake. This is perhaps best illustrated in Plato's *Theaetetus* where Socrates and Theaetetus debate whether knowledge is like birds that are caught in a cage that represents the mind. Socrates suggests, "that every mind contains a kind of aviary stocked

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<sup>74</sup> It should be noted that in both cases the addition of more reference points does not necessarily make the plotting of the unknown thing easier, just more precise. Actually, in both cases the addition of more points of reference is likely to make the plotting of the unknown a longer and more difficult action, as the navigator has more information to process. However, it is almost always worth the extra effort and given the accuracy of the end result.

<sup>75</sup> The use of the North Star as representative of the form of the object of an inquiry is really where this analogy begins to break down. It works so far as the North Star is seen as representing guiding us toward knowledge of the actual object, but unlike the North Star the form of an object cannot be referenced by simply looking up to the sky on a clear night. Clearly the biggest difference here is that while the North Star is a physical, and therefore changing, thing, the forms are neither physical nor in flux.

with birds of every sort [...] and take the birds to stand for pieces of knowledge."<sup>76</sup> Thus, possessing knowledge is akin to having the birds captured within the aviary, and recalling the knowledge is akin to reaching in and grabbing them. In addition to having to grab the birds, there are many different kinds of birds within the cage and it is possible that one may reach in and grab the incorrect one. Just as an ignorant person might mistake a dove for a pigeon, it is possible that one may mistake knowledge of one subject for knowledge of another, for example eleven for twelve to borrow Socrates' example.<sup>77</sup> While this analogy seems to illustrate the type of process that Plato is describing when he speaks of recollection, it actually does not. As Socrates and Theaetetus continue their discussion they realize that, given the aviary example, they "were wrong in making the birds stand for pieces of knowledge only, and [they] ought to have imagined pieces of ignorance flying about with them in the mind," since it is possible to mistake a false opinion for actual knowledge of a subject, such as Meno falsely believing his original definition of virtue to be correct.<sup>78</sup> Thus, if one were to grasp a bird that represented ignorance, then he would not know that he had done so, and would instead mistake it for the correct bird he was reaching for (since, if he recognized the bird as ignorance then he would most certainly not make the mistake of grabbing it in the first place). However, if this is the case then we are once again faced with Meno's Paradox since, if the person grabbing the bird already knows which bird to grab, then the process of figuring out which one to grab is unnecessary, while if he does not know which one to grab then he would never know if

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<sup>76</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 197e.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 199b.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 199e.

he grabbed the incorrect one. Thus, as Socrates and Theaetetus realize, knowledge is not like birds in a cage, and one cannot simply grasp it as if it were like birds.

Plato provides an example of the recollective process in the *Meno* when Socrates walks one of Meno's slaves through a geometrical proof. He begins by drawing a square in the sand at his feet with a length and width of two, and asks the boy if he recognizes the figure and if he understands the properties of such a figure. Once Socrates is satisfied that the boy understands the properties of a square, he asks him to provide the length and width of a square with double the area of the first square, to which the boy replies "it will be double, Socrates, obviously."<sup>79</sup> Socrates then proceeds to draw a square with four by four dimensions and asks the boy to tell him the area. Immediately the boy sees his mistake and realizes that the new square does not have twice the area of the first but instead exceeds it by four times. The boy attempts to rectify his error by suggesting that the square with double the area of the first must then have a length and width of three, given that the dimensions of the original were two by two and the square that was four by four was too large. Again his error is displayed through the use of a diagram and afterward the boy exclaims that he does not know the answer to Socrates' challenge. In response, Socrates turns his attention back to Meno:

Observe, Meno, the stage [the boy] has reached on the path of recollection. At the beginning he did not know the side of the square of eight feet. Not indeed does he know it now, but then he though he knew it answered boldly as was appropriate – he felt no perplexity. Now however he does feel perplexed. Not only does he not know the answer; he doesn't even think he knows.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 82e.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 84a.

Socrates continues, and even Meno agrees that the boy is in a better position now having learned that what he thought was correct was in fact not, even if he did not learn the actual truth. Again, Socrates here shows himself to be like the sting ray by “paralyzing” the boy, that is, showing him his own ignorance. This will be a key issue for us later when we examine the dialectical structure of the recollective process. It is also worthwhile to point out here that at various points throughout the demonstration, Socrates stops to ensure with Meno that the answers are coming from the boy and not being provided by himself. Socrates is not dictating the answers to the boy, but instead is assisting the boy in reaching the conclusions on his own. This too has great significance in the dialectical structure of recollection, and as such, we will return to both of these points in the Fourth Chapter.

Having realized that he does not know something that he thought was true, the boy is now in a position where he can learn something new.<sup>81</sup> To return to our navigation analogy from earlier, the boy’s realization of his ignorance would be akin to someone realizing that they did not know the correct path to where they were attempting to travel, in other words that they were lost. This is an important but humbling step in both the navigational and epistemic process, as the realization that one does not know either the correct path to take or the correct answer to an inquiry is the first step in correcting that

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<sup>81</sup> Although I use the term “new” here, as we have seen, there is a sense in which the knowledge is not new at all, and was always present, implicitly, within the boy. When I say that the boy is now in a position to learn something new, I mean that he is now in a position to uncover explicit knowledge that was not already present to him explicitly. Thus, the use of “new” here is used in the same sense in which the point to be plotted is new; there is always the potential for finding this point, assuming the navigator knows his own position, but it needs to be first plotted through the act of navigation. This act of plotting and navigating to explicit knowledge will be discussed further in Chapter Four in relation to midwifery in Plato’s *Theaetetus*.

ignorance. In other words, the realization that one is lost is the first step in that person becoming un-lost.<sup>82</sup> Thus, with his new understanding that his prior opinions were false, the boy is now free to actually learn (or rather recollect) something new. Much like a navigator charting a new course, Socrates too starts by erasing the previously drawn diagrams and draws the original two by two square. He proceeds to attach three other squares of the same size to the original square making a larger four by four square that is divided into four equal sections. By drawing a diagonal line that divides each of these squares in half, Socrates creates a new square in the center of the previous one. By asking the boy various questions about the properties of diagonals and the size of the area of each square that is enclosed by the new square the boy is lead to realize that the new square has double the area of the original two by two square, making it the square that they had set out to find from the beginning. Again Socrates is explicit in pointing out that he did not provide the positions agreed to by the boy, but instead merely asked him questions that lead to the boy realizing these opinions himself. However, what is perhaps most telling from this model of recollection is that while Socrates does not provide the answers for the boy, his participation in the demonstration is paramount. That is to say, while Socrates certainly does not tell the boy the answers, he does engage with him in a

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<sup>82</sup> Descartes also follows this line of thinking, especially in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* where he explicitly states that his intention is to "devote [himself] sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of [his] opinions" (76). He also states in his *Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence* that "it is better to never study at all than to occupy ourselves with objects which are so difficult that we are unable to distinguish what is true from what is false, and are forced to take the doubtful as certain" (1). I am not quite convinced Plato would entirely agree with the second claim here, since for him it is precisely that task that the philosopher is to occupy himself with, to try to understand objects that are difficult and confusing. But the general claim, that an understood ignorance is preferable to a false opinion, is a similar one.



method of question and answer which assists the boy in arriving at the correct answer to the problem. Thus, as we shall soon see, the process of recollection is dialectical in nature.

The similar structure of the *Laches* and the beginning of the *Meno* is due to Plato's attempt to express the problems of induction and deduction, specifically their failures to define the virtues. Where the *Laches* ends in *aporia*, the *Meno* continues when Meno challenges Socrates to explain how inquiry is possible or necessary. Meno's paradox is the culmination of the problems of induction and deduction. If a person making an inquiry does not know the answer to that inquiry, an assumption of both the inductive and deductive methods, Meno asks how it would be possible to begin an inquiry into that thing or how it could ever be recognized were it found. Thus, he argues that inquiry itself is a pointless endeavor, since if the inquirer lacks the knowledge that he is searching for then he should never be able to acquire it. Alternatively, if the inquirer has the knowledge at the outset of their search then the inquiry is unnecessary, since the inquirer already possess the knowledge and would not need to search for it. Thus the failures of the inductive and deductive methods culminate in Meno's paradox, which aims to show that they are either pointless or unnecessary.

Thus, Plato's response to Meno's paradox, the doctrine of recollection, is, in turn, a response to the problems of induction and deduction. Furthermore, since, as we saw in Chapter One, the problems of induction and deduction are tied closely to the problem of the one and the many, Plato is also addressing this problem. By using the slave boy example as a model of how recollection works, Socrates expresses how it is possible that we can both have and not have the knowledge of an object of inquiry at the same time.

While the knowledge is not present in any effable manner it is present in a way that allows us to recognize instances of it and begin an inquiry into the object's true nature. Thus, the doctrine of recollection avoids the issues raised by Meno's paradox: we have the knowledge in such a way that inquiry can begin and that we can recognize the object if we come across it, but we do not possess the knowledge in such a way that makes the inquiry itself unnecessary. And, as we have seen with the slave boy and will further discuss in Chapter Four, it is through an acceptance of our ignorance and a willingness to engage with others that recollection and new understanding can take place.

## Chapter 4

The discussion in Chapters One and Two revolved around the problem of the one and the many, its relation to the problems of induction and deduction and the manner in which Plato addresses these issues in his philosophy. Chapter Three examined the culmination of these problems in Meno's paradox and Plato's response in the doctrine of recollection. This final Chapter will examine the relationship between recollection and dialectic. By re-examining the slave boy example as a controlled demonstration of the recollective process I will show the means by which recollection is possible through dialectical learning. Recollection is Plato's way forward in response to Meno's paradox, and dialectic is the means through which recollection is possible, the type of philosophy that must be employed in order to overcome the problems associated with Meno's paradox. This Chapter will examine Socrates' role as a midwife in the recollective process, helping to bring forth new ideas from his counterpart's implicit knowledge. Through his role as a mediator, Socrates aids others in birthing new ideas. Furthermore, I will examine dialectical teaching as opposed to what I will refer to as implantation from without: teaching where one person professes opinions to another without either person examining or challenging those opinions. Finally, I will address how recollection through dialectical learning circumvents the problem of *aporia*, the fact that Plato's dialogues often end with the characters in a state of bafflement without having answered the questions that were posed at the beginning.

Recollection is an act that requires both a having and a not having. While the slave boy grasps the basic geometrical principals that Socrates asks of him, he cannot answer the question of the dimensions of the double sized square. He does have some implicit

knowledge of geometry, enough to recognize the object Socrates draws as a square and therefore enough knowledge to begin the inquiry, but he does not have the explicit knowledge needed to answer Socrates' question. However, the point of this exercise is to show that while the boy does not have the knowledge to answer Socrates' inquiry at the beginning of the discussion, he does, in the end, answer that very inquiry on his own, without Socrates, or anyone else, providing him with the answer. The boy seemingly goes from not knowing the dimensions of the square with twice the area of the original to being able to recognize the correct answer without anyone telling him what it is. Thus, since the knowledge did not come from an outside source, it must have come from himself, he must have already somehow known it implicitly. However, while Socrates does not provide any answers to the boy along the path to the final answer they are looking for, he does indeed help him along by leading him in the correct direction. This notion of aiding another through the use of language and demonstration is paramount in the recollective process and, as we shall see throughout this Chapter, it is dialectical.

The notion that recollection requires both a having and a not having is paramount for the dialectic process. The model of the slave boy moving from implicit knowledge, a having, of the geometrical proof to explicit knowledge of it is only possible because there is also a not having: the fact that at the beginning of the example the boy did not know the answer. Returning to Meno's paradox, we can see how the having (*hexis*, literally meaning capacity), the boy's implicit knowledge, allows the inquiry to begin, since this knowledge gives the inquiry a possible starting point. As we have seen in Chapter Three, this implicit knowledge allows those engaging in inquiry to circumvent one of the problems associated with Meno's paradox, namely, how it is possible to conduct an

inquiry into something that is unknown to the inquirer because the object of inquiry is not totally unknown to the inquirer and therefore can be recognized if found. While this implicit knowledge shows that inquiry is not pointless, the boy's lack of explicit knowledge, the reason he cannot answer Socrates' question, is what makes inquiry necessary, thereby circumventing the opposing problem of Meno's paradox: why inquiry into something that is known would ever be necessary. Dialectic is the activity that allows the boy to recollect and can only begin when he is able to recognize his own ignorance. This ignorance is necessary for explicit knowledge to be formed or realized. The slave boy could not move forward in his path to answering Socrates' inquiry until he realized that he was not able to provide the necessary answer and what he had originally thought was knowledge was in fact a false opinion. His realization of his own ignorance, that there was a gap in his knowledge, was what allowed him to challenge his own opinions and move forward epistemically. This notion of the gap is paramount to the dialectic, and thereby recollective, processes.

Returning to Plato's *Seventh Letter*, this gap can be expressed as the separation between the fourth and fifth classes of objects, knowledge about an object and the real object itself. The fact that we have implicit knowledge is what allows us to move past the problem of how to begin inquiry proposed by Meno's paradox. This implicit knowledge, represented by the fourth class of objects, is the having with regard to recollection, or, to refer again to our navigation analogy, this class would represent the ability or capacity to navigate or plot the proper course to the unknown point by having a known starting point, one's own position. Alternatively, the fact that we do not have the knowledge in a way that is expressible linguistically at the outset of inquiry is what makes that inquiry

necessary. This is represented in the *Seventh Letter* by the fifth class of objects, the not having, since this class of objects, the true objects themselves, is removed or separate from the knowledge about them. Given the navigation analogy, this separation would represent the unknown point that we are trying to plot and the fact that we do not already know the correct path to that point, so therefore must engage in the act of navigation. The gap would be the literal separation of navigator and navigational end point and the very process of navigating to it. Much like the navigator plots and moves from his starting position through a newly plotted course to a previously unknown destination, the dialectician moves from a previously known point, implicit knowledge, through a newly established course of discussion and argument, dialectic, toward a previously unknown idea, explicit knowledge. In both cases there is also a need of reference points; for the navigator the other known points on the map used to properly triangulate the unknown position, and for the dialectician the opinions of others used to assist in the triangulation of knowledge. The gap is the space where this explicit knowledge can be recollected, the space between the knowing and not knowing, the fourth and fifth classes of objects, where we can move past the problems presented by Meno's paradox and engage in inquiry.<sup>83</sup> The fourth class of objects gives us the start point, while the fifth class of objects gives us our guide toward the eventual end point, and the gap represents the necessity of the journey itself and the space in which we find our end point. Language and demonstration represent the tools that we use to navigate, our map and compass. With

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<sup>83</sup> I am using spatial terms such as "gap" and "space" here not with the intention of suggesting that there is an actual physical space or gap where dialectic operates but instead that there is a separation between known and unknown that allows recollection to circumvent the problems of Meno's paradox.

regard to the *Seventh Letter* these tools would be the first three classes of objects: names, descriptions, and images, and, coupled with the fourth class, the implicit knowledge about the object of inquiry, our starting point, they can guide us to the explicit knowledge that we seek. As Plato explains, "if [...] a man does not somehow or other get hold of the first four, he will never gain a complete understanding of the fifth."<sup>84</sup>

Thus, returning to the model of the slave boy example, we see the having in the boy's implicit knowledge about geometry at the beginning of the model, the not having in his inability to answer Socrates' inquiry at the beginning of the demonstration, and the gap in his realization of his own ignorance that allows him to recollect the absent knowledge. This realization of ignorance, the gap, is what allows the activity of dialectic to occur. By using the first four classes of objects: names, descriptions, images and the boy's implicit knowledge of geometry, Socrates is able to assist the boy in recollecting the knowledge of the correct answer without simply dictating it to him. Socrates starts with the name of the subject of inquiry, square, and describes its properties using the images he draws in the sand. By drawing new images and describing them Socrates is able to assist the boy in moving from not knowing the area of the square twice the size of the original to gasping that knowledge by the end of the example. However, without Socrates' assistance the boy would have assumed his original answer, that the square with twice the area of the original two by two square had dimensions of four by four, was correct.<sup>85</sup> It is through the boy's acceptance of his ignorance, his willingness to accept that he did not possess the explicit knowledge that he thought that he had, that he is able to

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<sup>84</sup> Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 342d.

<sup>85</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 82e.

move forward in the example and eventually recollect the correct answer. The example of the slave boy is contrasted by Meno who, while clearly more educated than the slave boy, cannot move forward to learn something new for himself because he assumes that he already knows the answers to Socrates' questions. Take, for example, Meno's assumption that he knows the nature of virtue at the beginning of the dialogue and his astonishment that Socrates claims ignorance on the matter. When Socrates shows Meno that he in fact does not have knowledge of virtue, instead of accepting his own ignorance Meno tries to shut inquiry itself down by proposing his paradox. It is only after Meno realizes his own limitations that he too can move forward and learn something new, that inquiry is indeed possible and necessary. His admission at 84b that the slave boy is in a better position having had his false opinions about the geometrical proof destroyed and replaced by ignorance on the matter, as well as his acceptance of the process of recollection at 85c, show that Meno is capable of dialectical engagement. Both these passages indicate that Meno has progressed in his understanding of inquiry by witnessing the model of recollection demonstrated by Socrates with the slave boy.

As we noted earlier in Chapter Three, it is important for us to remember here that the slave boy example is just that, an example, a model or controlled demonstration of the process of recollection. The example works as a model, because Socrates and Meno already know the answer to the geometrical question proposed to the slave boy so they can check his answers along the way. However, with regard to recollection and dialectical learning of the nature of the virtues, the subject of inquiry about which Plato proposes to use this method, the participants do not explicitly have the answers that they seek, since if



they did then the inquiry would be unnecessary, as Meno's paradox has indicated.<sup>86</sup> The beginning of dialectical teaching requires that all parties involved come together with an understanding that they all lack the explicit knowledge they are seeking and through the through the medium of language and demonstration they can attempt to aid one another in reaching this knowledge. This type of teaching is contrasted with implantation from without, the process whereby one person professes his opinions to another. Plato's fear is that if this type of teacher's opinions are incorrect, then there is the chance that the students who are listening to the teacher are in danger of adopting the same, false, Sophistic opinions. As we have seen with Socrates, Plato clearly believes that an understanding of one's ignorance is much more preferable to the belief in an untrue opinion. Thus, with the dialectical process each member of the activity has already an understanding that he does not know the answer to what is being sought, that he lacks the explicit knowledge that they seek. Since no member of the group assumes to know the answer, each opinion proposed can be properly scrutinized and examined for any flaws, making it much less likely that the activity will result in the dialecticians believing in a false opinion. With regard to our navigation analogy, the use of implication from without would be akin to someone walking into the woods and assuming that he knew the correct path to where they wanted to go and ignoring the landmarks around them. This is a very dangerous action, both navigationally and dialectically since in both cases it is possible to

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<sup>86</sup> Take the *Laches*, for example. No one possesses the knowledge of courage and is waiting for the others to arrive at that knowledge, but instead there is an understanding that they do not have the knowledge and must work together to try to discover it.

get lost. Further, without the proper landmarks to aid one in orienting himself it can be very difficult to even realize that he is lost.<sup>87</sup>

The second important distinction between dialectic and implantation from without is that dialectic is a process of teaching whereby each dialectician must move through the correct path to the answer, while the teacher using implantation from without simply states an opinion without necessarily working through the process of how it was arrived at. As Socrates explains to Meno during the slave boy demonstration, “watch how [the boy] recollects things in order – the proper way to recollect.”<sup>88</sup> This process is important for several reasons. First of all it allows the dialecticians the opportunity to see an error in the movement toward their answer. Second, it allows the dialectician to learn something more about things other than simply the subject of inquiry. For example, in refining a definition and refuting false opinions about courage, the interlocutors in the *Laches* learn what things are not courage during their discussion. The failed definitions proposed throughout the dialogue serve to teach each member of the inquiry that while something such as staying at one’s post and not fleeing may be a courageous act, it is not the definition of courage itself. This point is also evident in the slave boy example since the boy not only discovers the dimensions of the square with an area twice as big as the first but also “learns the areas of the four-foot and three-foot squares. These are claims we

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<sup>87</sup> Navigationally these landmarks could be a mountain, tree or body of water, but dialectically they represent the opinions of others. Navigating either through the woods or epistemically without using these landmarks as aids yield no way for a person to check their progress along the way.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 82e.

would not attribute to the boy at the beginning of the interrogation; had he been familiar with the areas of these squares, he would not have forwarded them as solutions."<sup>89</sup>

The third important thing that dialectic offers that implantation from without does not is that teaching through a process, and not simply through professing an opinion, offers the dialectician an opportunity to see the process behind the answer: the reason why a particular answer is the best answer. This is analogous to solving an algebraic equation such as  $x-2=3$ . While someone teaching through implantation from without may tell you correctly that the answer is 5, dialectic gives you the reason why the answer is 5 ( $x-2=3$ ,  $x=3+2$ ,  $x=5$ ). Thus, when presented with a different yet similar problem, say  $x+3=10$ , the student who learns via dialectic has a distinct advantage in that he understands the underlying mathematical principles at play. As Heinaman suggests:

[dialectic] is not only the method for discovering the truth; the person with genuine knowledge must be able to successfully carry it out. Knowledge of X enables it possessor to 'give an account' of X, and, in standard cases, this involves the ability to state and explain the nature of X and to explain why that account is correct. It further involves the ability to defend the proposed definition against objections.<sup>90</sup>

The dialectical method, because it is a process of moving from ignorance to explicit knowledge that each member of the process must go through, can uncover important principles behind the answer that is being sought. Returning again to the slave boy example, it would have been easy for Socrates to simply tell the slave boy the answer to the geometrical proof, skipping the process of working through it altogether. However,

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<sup>89</sup> Franklin, Lee. "Meno's Paradox, the Slave-Boy Interrogation, and the Unity of Platonic Recollection". *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*. 47. (2009): 349-77, 363.

<sup>90</sup> Heinaman, Robert. "Plato: Metaphysics and Epistemology". *Routledge History of Philosophy vol.1: From the Beginning to Plato*. Ed. Taylor, C. C. W.. New York: Routledge, 1997, 376.

the benefit of Socrates working through the proof with the boy is that the boy is able to see the places where he errs as well as the process of how the correct answer is arrived at.

This is evident in

the way the boy realizes that a three-foot square has an area of nine (83e). Whereas Socrates has calculated the areas of all previous squares additively (82c-d, 83b-c), here he simply multiplies the length of the side by itself (83e). The slave expresses no confusion with this new method. In this, the slave displays a growing familiarity with the general relationship between a square's side and its area.<sup>91</sup>

If Socrates simply dictated the answer to the boy instead of working through the proof, then when faced with another geometrical problem the boy would not have any method at hand to attempt to solve it. In relation to the navigation analogy this would be the difference between Socrates simply telling the boy which way to go and him showing the boy how to properly use a map and compass to find the correct path himself. It is by working through the problem with Socrates' aid that the boy is able to grasp not only the correct answer to the question but also the proper method to use in order to get that answer. While it may seem like Socrates has to go through more work to teach the boy using dialectic, this method provides its advantages, especially when it comes to further passing on knowledge. While the student who learns via implantation from without can pass on the answer to the inquiry only in a repetitive way, that is by repeating the answer that was told to him, the student of dialectic is able to also pass on the reason why that particular answer is the best one. In other words, the student of dialectic is able to recollect knowledge with the assistance of the other members of the dialectical activity as well as assist others to recollect that knowledge as well. This ability to be able to pass on

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<sup>91</sup> Franklin, 363.

knowledge correctly and effectively is very important for Plato as we see in the beginning of the *Laches*.<sup>92</sup>

Within the dialectical process, opinion expressed through language and demonstration are mediators; they allow the activity of dialectic to take place and recollection to occur. As we have seen, with regard to the *Seventh Letter* language and demonstration can be represented by Plato's first three classes of objects: names, descriptions, and images. They serve as mediators since they are the tools that allow the dialectician to move between the having and not having of recollection. That is, they allow the participants of the process of dialectic to recollect the explicit knowledge that they seek. Through the interplay of two or more individuals, each member of the process puts forth what he believes to be a true opinion for each of the members to consider. Through these expressions and the scrutiny of them, dialecticians attempt to move closer to recollecting the knowledge of the subject of their inquiry. If recollection is the process of navigating from a known to an unknown point then the process whereby that point is plotted is dialectic, and where the navigator uses a map and compass to do his plotting the dialectician uses opinion expressed linguistically or through demonstration.<sup>93</sup> Language and demonstration also serve as mediating factors between individual people; they spur the dialectician to bridge the gap between knowing and not knowing, to recollect, and also allow him to motivate the next person to do the same. With regard to navigation

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<sup>92</sup> See section 178 specifically. Lysimachus is lamenting that he and Melesias are unable to pass on the knowledge of how to be noble and good citizens, as were their fathers, to their sons.

<sup>93</sup> Or to follow Aristotle's idea of *potentia* as expressed through the acorn: where the potential in the acorn is actualized in physical growth and the potential in the human is actualized in epistemic growth, opinion expressed through language and demonstration serves as the food or nourishment.

these people represent the other points that help the navigator triangulate the correct position to properly plot the course, the landmarks along the path.

This ability to motivate the other to recollect knowledge for himself is Socrates' role as a dialectician. While in the *Apology* he claims to know nothing, Socrates does possess at least one *techné*, dialectic.<sup>94</sup> This fact can be clearly seen in Plato's *Theaetetus* where Socrates is described as a midwife, a caregiver who helps with the delivery of a newborn child. While in a discussion about what nature of knowledge is, Theaetetus says to Socrates that although he has often mused over the question he has never found an adequate answer, and yet he cannot get the question out of his mind. Socrates replies, "that is because your mind is not empty or barren. You are suffering the pains of travail".<sup>95</sup> What Socrates is saying here is that Theaetetus is going through the pains of labor, of childbirth. He continues and informs his partner that his mother was a midwife and that he also practices the same art. However, while Socrates' mother no doubt practiced the art of midwifery with physical children, her son is practiced at doing so with epistemic infants: his art is helping to birth new knowledge. This idea culminates when Theodorus asks Socrates to provide an explanation for his prior refutation of one of Theaetetus' arguments. Socrates replies to the charge:

I like the way you take me for some sort of bag full of arguments, and imagine I can easily pull out a proof to show that our conclusion is wrong. You don't see what is happening. The arguments never come out of me; they always come from the person I am talking with. I am only at a slight advantage in having the skill to get some account of the matter from another's wisdom and entertain it with fair treatment. So no, I shall not give any explanation myself but try and get it out of our friend.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 21.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 148e.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

So then, like the midwife, Socrates is helping to produce something that belongs to someone else. His skill is only to work with the person in order to help him produce it.

Plato's metaphor of Socrates as a midwife is directly related to the dialectical method and therefore to the process of recollection. In the dialectical method there is always a need of a second party, another person who serves as a mediator of ideas. As we have seen, the process begins with one person making a claim and then the other attempting to refute this claim with as much vigor as possible in order to test its strength. Through this method the dialecticians hope constantly to refine the opinions expressed by both parties until what is being sought is discovered. Both parties work together to navigate until the correct point is plotted. It is imperative that the knowledge that both parties are seeking takes precedence over either member of the process, as Socrates expresses in the *Phaedo*:

If you take my advice, you will think very little of Socrates, and much more of the truth. If you think that anything I say is true, you must agree with me; if not, oppose it with every argument you have. You must not allow me, in my enthusiasm, to deceive both myself and you.<sup>97</sup>

Much as the midwife is charged with the care of the health of the child during and after its birth, the dialectician must too care for the newly formed idea; he must nurture it and put its health above all else.<sup>98</sup> However, the manner in which the dialectician does this differs

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<sup>97</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 91b.

<sup>98</sup> Of course the midwife is also charged with the health of the mother during the birthing process. While it seems that the analogy here gives little regard to the members participating in the dialectic "think very little of Socrates, and much more of the truth", there is a very real sense that the process of dialectic, that is the discovery of the truth, is all about the health of the members participating in the process. Plato talks about the health of the soul in relation to the knowledge or opinions that it receives in multiple places of his corpus (see specifically: *Phaedo* 99d where Socrates talks about the fear of

considerably from the method by which the midwife cares for the child. While the child must be protected and coddled the newly formed idea must be attacked as fiercely as possible as to test it and ensure it is not a false idea.

Much like the child that comes from the mother, the idea too comes from a member of the dialectical process. The analogy of childbirth helps to explain how recollection can circumvent the problems presented by Meno's paradox of how it is possible to begin an inquiry into something that is unknown and why it is necessary if the knowledge is already present. Thus, with these problems in mind, it is important to note that while the knowledge is already present within the dialectician it is not fully formed, that is, it is only present implicitly. Much as the child is undeveloped and not fully formed as it lives inside its mother, the idea too is present but not fully developed. It is the moment of birth that forever changes the child. In that single moment the child becomes something new; it is brought into the world and for the first time exists apart from its mother. And while the child becomes something very different and new at the moment it is brought out of the womb, it is still the same child that existed within the mother for the previous nine months. It is in a similar sense that the ideas brought forth through the dialectical method are new and yet already present within the person who is recollecting them. While the idea was already present within the dialectician, it is at the moment of utterance that it becomes a fully formed and effable opinion. It is this moment that is the key to both recollection and dialectic; one person makes a stand and provides an opinion

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blinding his soul as he would his eyes were he to look directly into the sun (this passage has a strong connection to the famous cave analogy) as well as *Protagoras* 313, where Socrates, in attempting to discover what the sophists teach, warns about the dangers of exposing the soul to false opinions).



that is then challenged and refined.<sup>99</sup> It is in this process that the gap between knowing and not knowing, which we discussed earlier, can be filled. The dialectician begins with the implicit knowledge that provides the starting point of inquiry and by using language and demonstration has the possibility to discover something that was absent at the outset of the discussion, namely, explicit knowledge.

This is what Socrates attempts with the slave boy example in the *Meno*. Though the dialectical process, aided by Socrates as the midwife, the slave boy moves from implicit knowledge, which allows the inquiry to begin, to a realization of his ignorance and then finally to explicit knowledge about the subject at hand. As we noted earlier, Socrates in no way gives the boy the answers which he seeks, he simply aids the boy to realize, to recollect, the explicit knowledge himself. Without Socrates' help the boy would have gone on assuming that his false opinion about the answer to the question was actually knowledge. It is only through Socrates "stinging" the boy, to use Meno's terminology, that he can realize his ignorance and enter into the process of recollecting the correct answer to the inquiry. Further, Socrates aids the boy in shaping his answer by guiding him in the needed directions, in effect guiding him to navigate the proper path to knowledge while not actually doing the navigating himself. Each time the boy realizes

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<sup>99</sup> Aristotle also discusses the importance of making a stand: "[knowledge] is like a rout in battle stopped by first one man making a stand and then another, *until the original formation has been restored*" *Post An II*, 19. Emphasis mine. It is significant that Aristotle does not describe making a stand until the battle is over but instead until it has returned to its initial position. Making a stand epistemically by proposing a definition does not end the argument but instead begins the process of dialectic with regard to that definition and, if the definition is rejected, the next definition proposed begins the same process over again.

that the opinion he has expressed is not the correct one it is as if he further narrows or defines the correct path.

While this method seems to work quite well with the model of the slave boy and the geometrical proof, what Plato is really interested in is defining the virtues. As we have seen, the issue with attempting to do this is that the definitions put forth are always too narrow or too broad to be the virtue that they are describing. It is Plato's hope that by using the dialectical method to recollect we may move past the inherent problems of induction and deduction. This is possible since recollection is an activity that begins with a having and a not having and thus, circumvents the problems of Meno's paradox to which induction and deduction fall prey.

However, none of the dialogues discussed here end with any satisfactory definition of a virtue and it is often the case that the interlocutors end up more confused than they were when the dialogue started.<sup>100</sup> This is often referred to as the problem of *aporia*. There are two important considerations to make on this point. The first we discussed above: dialectic offers more than just the possibility of understanding the subject at hand. As we have seen, it can also illuminate other considerations about the world and our place within it. Even had the slave boy not realized the correct dimensions of the square, he would still have been better off than he was when he had started, because he would have realized his own ignorance and abandoned a false opinion that he incorrectly thought to be knowledge. The second consideration more directly addresses

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<sup>100</sup> The *Republic* is a notable exception to this trend in Plato's early and middle dialogues since Plato does give a rather convincing argument for Justice being each person doing what they are best suited to do in harmony with the state. For one formulation of this definition see Book IV 434c.

the problem of *aporia*: to expect Plato to define justice, courage or any of the other virtues at the end of any of his dialogues would be to miss the point of those dialogues entirely. Plato was not writing these works in order to dictate to his audience what the nature of the virtues is. In doing that he would be subscribing to the very method that he believes to be fallacious and even dangerous, implantation from without. With this in mind, it is my contention that Plato would wish us to challenge even his seemingly satisfactory definition of justice in the *Republic*, to engage with it in a dialectical manner and attempt to improve it even further. Dialectic is an act, a journey that people must make for themselves. Aided as they are by others, they should not be told the answer to their inquiry but should be moved to work with others in order to realize that knowledge for themselves. With this in mind it is my contention that there really is no problem of *aporia* to speak of. The dialogues should not be read as dictating some sort of truth to us but rather they express a means for acquiring knowledge for ourselves. Through engaging with the texts, and with one another about them, we can get a clear picture of what sort of things the virtues could be, and in doing so we have a very real opportunity to acquire knowledge about them. Plato's fear is that the lines of communication, of real argument, will close, and one person will passively accept the opinions of another without challenging him to push those opinions to their limits. It is only through engaging with one another and pushing our dialectical partners to really challenge their opinions that we can all move forward epistemically. It is only through this type of discussion and engagement with one another that we can be sure that the other person's opinions, or our own, are true. Perhaps most importantly it is only through understanding our own

ignorance and embracing it rather than avoiding it that we can hope to bridge the gap between knowing and not knowing and acquire new knowledge.

### Conclusion

Plato's doctrine of recollection, as practiced through the process of dialectic, is his answer to the problems inherent with the inductive and deductive methods and thereby, due to their intrinsic connection, the problem of the one and the many expressed through the Presocratic philosophers. Epistemically, the problem of the one and the many expresses the problem of how it is possible to know particulars given that if we rely solely on our senses the world appears in a state of ever shifting flux, as maintained by Heraclitus, and if we rely solely on reason then it follows that Being is one continuous, unified principle, as expressed by Parmenides. Where Heraclitus maintains that the world is in a constant state of flux, the issue of how to understand particulars is based on our ever-changing sensation of them. On the other hand, if non-being is impossible, as Parmenides contends, then it must have always been, since it could never have non been. Furthermore, if Being has always been then it must always continue to be and, since there can be nothing outside of being, it must also be one unified thing, therefore it must follow that Being is one, continuous principle. The issue of how to understand particulars in this case is that, given that Being is unified and continuous, it is unchanging and undivided and therefore there could not be any perception of individual particulars that are separate from Being itself. Thus, with Heraclitus we have an absolute individuation, a constant flux, and with Parmenides we have an absolute unity, an eternal one. While both philosophers approach the world from different directions it is clear that both theories suffer from one common issue: how is it possible to account for the particular objects we encounter every day?

Directly related to this problem are the issues inherent with the inductive and deductive methods. Where Heraclitus' flux expounds the problem of moving from absolute individuation to one continuous object the inductive method aims to move from observations about a group of particulars to a universal claim about the set of those particulars. In both cases sense data is relied upon to move from a number of experiences to one thing and in both cases a problem arises in doing so. As we have seen, with Heraclitus the issue is synthesizing the many experiences of one thing into a single object, whereas with the inductive method the problem arises in synthesizing many experiences with one type of object into a claim about all objects of that type. In both cases there is an attempt to unify multiple experiences into a single thing with the use of limited sense data. Parmenides' one, on the other hand, is directly related to the deductive method, which attempts to take a universal claim and attributed it to a particular member of a set. The issue in both cases is in taking a singular principle, in Parmenides' case the one and in deductions' case a universal claim, and attempting to pluralize it.

Plato addresses these issues in both his *Laches* and *Meno*. His characters offer suggestions in attempting to discover the nature of the virtues and define them. What is soon discovered is that language is either too specific, when the definitions proposed are arrived at inductively, or too broad, when the definitions proposed are arrived at deductively. The goal is to find a definition that is neither too specific, as to not account for all of the thing that the interlocutors are trying to define and not too broad, as to allow contrary concepts to fall under the definition. In order to achieve this goal Plato realizes that he must assume a new starting point other than using the particular and then moving inductively or the universal and then moving deductively. In response to Meno's paradox,

which is the culmination of the above problems, Plato offers his famous doctrine of recollection, which explores the possibility that the knowledge we seek is somehow already present within us even if it is not always present to us.

Recollection then is a process of both having and not having. We begin inquiry already possessing knowledge implicitly and thought the act of dialectic attempt to achieve knowledge in an explicit way. This implicit knowledge is not within us like birds in a cage or like coins in a pocket but instead as a starting point on a journey toward knowledge. While the possibility of acquiring that knowledge is there, since we begin with this starting point, we must engage with one another dialectically in order to properly navigate to the knowledge. While a navigator uses a map and compass as tools, the dialectician navigates toward knowledge using language and argument.

Dialectic is the process whereby recollection can take place. It involves two or more parties where each member agrees to tell the others the truth and to challenge each proposition with as much force as they can in order to ensure that it is not a false opinion. Through this process a new idea can be birthed much like a newborn child, as we have seen through Plato's *Theaetetus* and the description of Socrates as a midwife. The ideas are also new in the same manner as a newborn child is new. They have existed previously inside the mother but at the moment of birth they become very different and new things.

Dialectic is a process of realizing that we do not have all the answers to the questions raised. Its power also lies in its simplicity. Instead of assuming that we know the proper answer to whatever inquiry we are faced with we accept our ignorance, and in the space of that ignorance we, through argument with another, allow a place for the partners jointly to reach an understanding, a stand (*episteme*). Plato's goal with the

dialectic and recollective process was to create a method of education that accepted ignorance and used it as a tool and not a flaw. The benefit of such a process is that in assuming our ignorance and not knowledge we stand a much better chance of not accepting a false opinion as actual knowledge and avoid the risk of passing on that false opinion to another person so that they too may be prevented from believing what is false.



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